



new creation teaching ministry: tuesday night studies 2009

the things we firmly believe

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Study 1: An Introduction to Theology

What is theology?

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines theology as:

The study or science which treats of God, His nature and attributes, and His relations with man and the universe; 'the science of things divine' (Hooker); divinity.

The word theology derives from two Greek words - *theos* (God) and *logos* (word). Theology is the word (study, theory, principle) concerning God. Geoff Bingham says, "Theology is man's reflection upon what he knows, or thinks he knows, of God."¹

Living as we do in an age where what we feel has come to matter more than what we think, and living as we do in an era where Christian belief is often attacked vigorously academically, the idea of doing theology is viewed by many Christians as a suspect task. For some there is a suspicion that *thinking* is unreal, or at least less "real" than *feeling*, and that an intellectual or propositional approach may rob us of some of the reality and dynamic of the experience of faith. For some other Christians there is a fear that an academic approach, and especially engagement with contrary thoughts and ideas, may well lead finally to scepticism and loss of faith. So the formal activity of theology is not always so popular.

The fact though is that every person alive – Christian, religious or other – is a theologian. Everybody thinks on the things of God and tries to come to conclusions about those matters. Atheists often think on these matters more than non-atheists. Perhaps the hardest job for human beings is to refuse to think on these things at all!

The relationship between theology and the truth is not an easily described one. The truth is God Himself in His being and action; His word is His revelation of that truth; theology is human reflection upon that revelation. Someone has described theology as a road map to the truth, but not the truth itself. At its best theology is an accurate and faithful guide that enables people to know where they are in the truth of God, and how each of the elements of the truth are connected and inter-related. At its worst, theology leads astray and confuses people. What is even more alarming is that it is possible to know the best theology and still not have entered the truth of God – a little like memorising the road maps but never actually going to the places they indicate!

How do we come to theology?

Do you need to know loads of academic theology to know the truth? The truth of God must be simple enough since Jesus told us to become as little children to enter the kingdom. Knowledge of God involves trust, reverence and obedience. Since truth is God Himself, it is not simply propositional and abstract, but living, dynamic, personal and full of love. Truth has to be known in

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *The Things We Firmly Believe*, 2nd ed., p. 5 (NCPI: Blackwood 1986)

what we do and how we live, as well as in how and what we think. In his outline of theology, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*, John Calvin says:

A saying of Chrysostom's has always pleased me very much, that the foundation of our philosophy is humility. But that of Augustine pleases me even more: "When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule in eloquence, he replied, 'Delivery'; what was the second rule, 'Delivery'; what was the third rule, 'Delivery'; so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, 'Humility.'"²

So immediately in this matter we are faced up with a deeply personal question. Does any person have the humility needed to undertake the task of theologising truly? It would be fairly true to say that pride and arrogance have marked a great deal of the theological discussion that happens between human beings! And what of the problem of human beings who are opposed to God, angry with Him? Are human beings in that frame of mind which will permit true study? Does any person actually want really to know God and God's truth?

The Scriptures tell us that in fact humanity since Adam does not wish to know God. Romans 3:10-12 quotes the Old Testament as Paul starkly tells us:

There is no one righteous, not even one;
There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.
All have turned away, they have together become worthless;
There is no one who does good, not even one.

The truth of God as we have seen makes high demands on a person – we know the truth only as we are *in* the truth. In Adam, we have refused this, and now also seek to refuse to be confronted by God about it. We dread relational revelation of God, and like Adam we hide where we can. We exchange the truth for a lie; we turn to idols rather than serve the living God (Rom. 1:18-32). In this we are now dead – i.e. relationally dead to God. Hence the humility needed in approaching God is gone. Now Jesus' words to Nicodemus hold true for us: "Unless a man be born again (or *from above*) he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Paul says,

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1Cor. 2:14)

Theology can be an expression of all this – the refusal to know God rather than the desire to relate to Him. When the human heart has been humbled by grace, having found that God the Father has reconciled us to Himself while we were still enemies through the death of His Son, then we can begin the true task of theology.

The sources of theology

In any theology the enquirer starts off with the assumption that he can come to know something of his subject – God. On what basis is this assumption made? In Christian theology the basic starting point of all thinking is that *God reveals Himself*. Unless God reveals Himself, He cannot be known. Our thinking about God is grounded in His declaration concerning Himself. Theology is not essentially creative; it is constructive. The reason for God's revelation of Himself is that He desires us to know Him and have fellowship with Him. This gives us a good sense of the starting point and the end point of theology.

² John Calvin, Book 2, Chapter 2, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, p. 269; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; ed. John T. McNeill. (Westminster: Philadelphia 1960)

In the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments we have set out for us the means or *media* that God uses in revealing Himself. They are³:

- a. *Creation*: Psa. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:19-20
- b. *Providence*: Psa. 10; Matt. 6:26, 28, Acts 14:17
- c. *The acts of God in history*: Dan. 4:34-35; Acts 17:26-28; Pss. 105-107, Ezek. 39:25-29
- d. *Dreams, visions, theophanies, angels*: Gen. 15:1; Exod. 3:1ff; Num. 12:6, Matt. 1:20-21, Acts 18:9-10; 27:23-25
- e. *The Law of God*: Deut. 4:7-8; Psa. 19:7-11
- f. *The Prophets*: Amos 3:7-8, 2Pet. 1:20-21; Luke 24:25-27
- g. *The giving of His word*: 1Sam. 15:10; 2Sam. 7:4 (the Old Testament is filled with such passages); Luke 3:2
- h. *Jesus Christ the Son*: John 1:14, 18; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:1-3; John 14:6-11
- i. *The Holy Spirit*: John 16:12-15; 1Cor. 2:9-16
- j. *The church, the people of God*: Exod. 19:5-6; 1Pet. 2:9-10; 1Chron. 16:8; Psa. 145:3-7; Ezek. 39:7

All of these media are used by God to reveal themselves – but we only know this from the Scriptures that tell us it is so. We only know God reveals Himself in these ways by the Bible’s informing us it is so.

We asked, “How do we come to theology?” Rightly answered we should say, “We come to theology because revelation first came to us!” In all of the above media, we must be careful to remember that in each of these media God is acting, making Himself known. It is not that we have these sources as a kind of “middle ground” that we work on to extract the truth of God; God is speaking and revealing Himself.⁴ There is nothing static in God’s revelation for “My Father is working, and I am working also” – i.e. God is always in action. This action is with a view to His ultimate purpose in history, the *telos*, which tells us that history is not simply a series of (unfortunate) events, but that in fact God is working all things to fulfil His purposes and to manifest His glory. At the end will be the full knowledge of God (Isa. 11:9). Theology is our seeking to understand and to be in the good of all this.

³ From *The Things We Firmly Believe*, pp. 7-8 with some variation in the references

⁴ Some theologians have distinguished between *general* and *special* revelation. General revelation is God’s showing Himself forth in those media that are available to all human beings; special revelation comes through His particular dealings with the world through salvation history focussed in His dealings with Israel and then Christ – and so this includes the Scriptures which are formed in those dealings.

Appendix: Forms of theology

Biblical theology is the study of God's revelation in its historical sequence – it traces the history of the revelation of God and sees how that revelation has unfolded and led to its focal point in Jesus Christ. (Sub-divisions of this are Old Testament Theology and New Testament Theology.)

Systematic theology is the drawing from the whole scope of revelation in Scripture the themes of that Scripture and putting them into a systematic order.

Historical theology surveys the development of theological thought throughout church history. There are four broad streams within historical theolog, which correspond with four great eras in church history:

Patristic theology refers to the work of the early church fathers in systematising Christian thought especially as Christianity faced a pagan world saturated with Greek and Gnostic philosophy and sought to give expression to Biblical truth. Theology served to make clear the difference between Christian truth and Roman and Greek thought .

Scholastic theology developed in the Middle Ages, and reflected a synthesis of philosophy and Christian doctrine. For example, Thomas Aquinas, the classic scholastic theologian, modelled his theological structure on the approach of the pagan philosopher Aristotle.

Reformed theology was a reaction to the absurd and untrue scholasticism. At the time of the Reformation the study of the Scriptures was being revitalised through a return to the original texts in Hebrew and Greek. The theology of the Reformation did not seek vindication by association with an extra-Biblical approach (e.g. Aristotelianism) but was content to simply give expression to the message of the Bible.

Modern theology is a very varied area, but is typified mostly by the subjecting of the Scriptures to the examination of Reason. What was not provable became suspect. Doubts were raised about the historical accuracy of Biblical accounts. Supernatural events were deemed to be a reflection more of a pre-modern worldview of Biblical writers, rather than historical reality. However within modern theology have arisen movements that have reacted against and responded to the scepticism of modernity.

Perhaps we are entering an era of *post-modern theology*. The main tenet of the post-modern thinker is that what an author meant in writing is not accessible to the reader and that all meaning is simply a construction. It is claimed that no truth is communicable. This is devastating of all certainty in life and faith. Again, in the face of these critiques a response is arising.