

## **Introduction to Theology**

### **Theology defined**

Theology is simply the study of God. In one sense, every person is a theologian in that it is impossible to live life without giving some thought to God (Romans 1:18-32). When people think about God, they are doing theology.

Since no person can avoid theology, the issue is not whether we are going to be theologians, but whether we are going to be a good theologian or a bad theologian. To the degree that our beliefs and behavior align with God's will, as revealed in His Word, we will be good theologians. This must be the ultimate goal of the study of God.

### **The types of theology**

Theology is often grouped in various ways. Understanding these groupings will assist us in learning what people mean when speaking of theology.

Theology may be grouped by the era of its development (patristic theology, medieval theology, reformation theology, modern theology), by viewpoint (Arminian theology, Catholic theology, liberation theology, charismatic theology) or by focus (historical theology, exegetical theology, systematic theology).

We will cover systematic theology, which is a correlation of the total structure of biblical doctrine. This systematization of Bible doctrine is not found categorized in defined topics in the Bible but rather has developed over the years.

### **Theology has developed**

Theology has developed over the centuries. One reason is that God has given us His revelation in a progressive form. The Israelites who wandered in the wilderness knew less revelation from God than the Israelites who lived during the time of the exile to Babylon, and we have been given even more knowledge of God with the coming of Jesus and the completion of the New Testament.

Another reason that theology has developed over time is that certain doctrines were studied before others. This came to be because at different times during the history of the church, certain doctrines came under attack from heretics. As error was being taught, the church was required to clarify the truth of God's Word concerning these issues.

For example, the early church was consumed with defending doctrines such as the person of Christ. The church during the Reformation was concerned with issues surrounding salvation and the work of Christ. Interest in biblical prophecy has grown most in the past two centuries.

The fact of the development of theology helps us understand how doctrines have been grouped in certain categories.

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### **Theology matters**

Many Christians tend to consider the study of theology as unnecessary. There are many reasons that have contributed to this prevailing view. One reason is that in a day when the authority of the Bible is disputed and when many have denied the infallibility of the Scripture, some feel there is little to be gained in theological examination. In other words, why improve the building if the foundation is not sure?

Secondly, many Christians consider theology to be uncertain and leading only to endless opinions with no final answers. If no one can be certain, why investigate issues that will result in disagreement between Christians?

Also, for many people, a desire for unity has supplanted a pursuit of truth. While unity is desired, it is not achieved apart from being "made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). While all Christians are unified in Christ positionally (John 17:21), the practical outworking of unity is possible by careful adherence to God's Word, not by simply declaring unity in spite of competing beliefs.

In contrast to being uncertain or inconsequential, theology is absolutely critical for living the Christian life. A. W. Tozer, in his book *The Knowledge of the Holy*, confirmed this point:

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the church is always God himself and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like....I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God."

Understanding theology not only will help us to mature as Christians, it helps us to serve others. If people are led astray by false teaching, we will be better equipped to help them. As people need to know God's word, we will be better able to direct them toward particular passages of relevance to them.

By studying theology, we are enabled to teach ourselves and others what God says, thus fulfilling the second part of the Great Commission, "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

### **All theology matters**

Often people divide Bible doctrine into two categories, what is essential and what is non-essential. Essential doctrine is usually understood to be matters related to salvation, that is that Jesus is God and salvation is by grace through faith. Non-essential doctrine is usually understood to be matters upon which Christians disagree. An example is one of the most popular Christian apologetic organizations advocates the maxim, "in essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things charity."

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While unity, liberty and charity are all important, the problem lies in the fact that the Bible does not describe for us which doctrines are essential and which are non-essential. God does not put some doctrine in red letters for us. On what basis do we decide what is truly essential?

It cannot be how often a doctrine is presented in the Bible. For example, the virgin birth of Christ is normally considered essential. It was one of the five "Fundamentals" from the popular publication of the early 1900's. Indeed to deny the virgin birth of Christ is to deny the person of Christ. Yet this doctrine is only taught a couple of places in the Bible (Matthew 1:23-25; Luke 1:26-38; Isaiah 7:14).

Wayne Grudem offers the following guideline, "A major doctrine is one that has a significant impact on our thinking about other doctrines, or that has a significant impact on how we live the Christian life. A minor doctrine is one that has very little impact on how we think about other doctrines, and very little impact on how we live the Christian life." Many would likely agree with this. However, certainly we have seen how doctrines that we have once considered minor have major significance when ignored or denied. So "very little impact" may only be until we arrive at the point when we see the doctrine as having more relevance to our life, or when we find out the consequences that occur when the doctrine is denied. But most importantly, this guideline forces us to conclude that some of the teachings of God have very little impact on how we live the Christian life. If a teaching is important enough for God to communicate to us, it is important enough for us to take seriously.

All doctrine is essential in that we are required to accept and respond to it completely. Some doctrines may not undermine the gospel message directly but the gospel is only part of what we are to defend. All theology matters.

### **Theological presuppositions**

In order to adequately study theology, we must establish several truths that are presupposed beforehand. These truths deal with the theological concept of *metaphysics*, that is the ultimate nature of reality. The central issue of metaphysics is *ontology*, which asks the question, "what is really real?"

In order to answer the question about what is real, we must establish how we know what is real. This branch of philosophy is called *epistemology*, which asks the question, "how do we really know?" These presuppositions about reality and knowledge are assumed true in order to study theology.

Clearly, what is real is real because God created it (Genesis 1). We know what is real because God has revealed it to us. The Bible teaches that these presuppositions to theology are self-evident to all men. It is the fool that says in his heart there is no God (Psalm 14:1). Absolute truth is never defended in the Scripture as being necessary, it is also simply assumed to be the proper approach to reality. Likewise, we know about God because God has made Himself evident to us, His eternal power and divine nature are seen by all men (Romans 1:19-20).

Yet these statements presuppose the truthfulness of the Bible. This could be considered circular reasoning but all reasoning is circular in that everyone must presuppose something in order to reason about anything. We are presupposing what God has presupposed, that He exists, that He has

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communicated to us and that in His communication to us He has made certain presuppositions Himself, and as such these presuppositions must be true.

It is on this basis that the Bible says "the righteousness of God has been revealed from faith to faith" (Romans 1:17). We begin by faith and we end in faith. Yet faith is completely consistent with reason. We can in faith provide reasons for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). This reasoning is not in authority over God's revelation but is a manifestation of loving God with all our mind (Matthew 22:37). All knowledge comes from Christ (Colossians 2:3-8).

With regard to the role of reason in faith, there are two basic evangelical perspectives, *presuppositionalism* and *evidentialism*. Presuppositionalism is preferred because it reasons from God's revelation to come to theology and uses evidences for belief within the biblical framework, as opposed to reasoning from evidences for faith to a biblical framework.

Presuppositionalism sees faith as preceding understanding (Hebrews 11:3) because our fallen human condition has rendered reasoning apart from God's enlightenment through the Holy Spirit as incapable of achieving true saving faith. Evidentialism, also known as classical apologetics or semi-rationalism, sees mankind having a common ground, able to start with human reason and proceed to faith.

Therefore, we will cover these presuppositions to theology not as a means of convincing people who do not believe but instead providing evidence to support those who Christ is drawing to Himself by faith. This becomes increasingly important as more people have less of a Christian view of God and the world. To talk about God at all requires a basic understanding of certain truths. If we wrongly assume these truths are adhered to we will fail to communicate to people about our God.