

An Introduction to Theology

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What is Theology?

Theology is a word which many tremble at as they picture dry academics and controversy which only real “Bible students” can understand. While this can appear to be a sort of humility, it is actually an ignorant position that produces needless fear. We need to understand what theology is before we can question its necessity.

So then, we should start with a definition. What is theology? Theology is the study of God. But because God is the center of literally *everything*, especially in Scripture, theology extends to studying God's Being, His works, and His relation to man as revealed in the Bible. The truth is, for one to hate theology, he has to hate studying God – a notion that should be absurd to every believer.

It is no wonder, though, that many become intimidated when they hear that word, because there are different types of theology, some of which have the potential to be abused. Generally, in the world of Christian academics, there are five branches identified under the broad term “theology.”

- *Systematic Theology*: the presentation of the Christian body of doctrine on a topical, systematic basis. While systematic theology is good in and of itself, it does have potential to be abused in academic circles. One example of this is the invasion of highly philosophical discussions, rather than the exposition of Bible doctrine.
- *Dogmatic Theology*: the presentation of truth as understood, affirmed, and defined by various groups within Christendom. For example, considering “Reformed theology” would be a type of dogmatic study. This type of study has certainly been abused in history.
- *Biblical Theology*: the study of truth (its development and emphases) according to genre, book, and author in Scripture. Again, this could be misconstrued by liberal theologians to be a critical dissection of the Bible, when it should never be.
- *Historical Theology*: the study of truth as understood through and at different times in the history of Christianity. This has the potential of both over-emphasis and under-emphasis.
- *Practical Theology*: the study of theories and methods of practical Christianity (e.g. preaching, missions, evangelism, Christian living, etc.). Unless Scripture reigns, this could simply be a psychology-based analysis which ends in theories and not true wisdom from God.

However, let us not be discouraged from studying God simply because others have at times made a mockery of it. We need to understand that studying the Bible is not dry nor dangerous if done properly. Yes, it is hard. Yes, it takes discipline. But when we see God in all His glory behind those pages, it certainly will not be, of all things, dry!

With this in mind, it is helpful for us to understand the ten main areas in which the theologian studies (and remember, “theologian” does not equal “seminary student”). These areas fall under “systematic theology”: notice the logical ordering of them.

1. *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Bibliology). This area of study often includes subjects like the sufficiency of Scripture, infallibility, authority, etc. Often the canon and transmission of Scripture are discussed also.
2. *The Doctrine of God* (Theology Proper). The title “Theology Proper” narrows the study to the doctrine of God specifically, as opposed to general studies within broader “Theology.” In this area, the discussion revolves primarily around God's attributes and Being.
3. *The Doctrine of Christ* (Christology). In this area, the focus remains on Christ's Person, offices, and comings.
4. *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Pneumatology). The Spirit's Person and function are often the main subjects of this study. The technical name is derived from the Greek word for “spirit,” *pneuma*.
5. *The Doctrine of Angels* (Angelology). Within “Angels,” we study good angels, demons, and Satan himself.
6. *The Doctrine of Man* (Anthropology). Here, man's makeup, fall, and role are discussed. *Anthrōpos* is the Greek word for “man,” thus explaining the technical name of this study.
7. *The Doctrine of Sin* (Hamartiology). Here sin is considered in its many aspects, such as its nature, its punishment, etc. *Hamartia* is the Greek word for “sin.”
8. *The Doctrine of Salvation* (Soteriology). Depending on whether the Atonement is discussed under the doctrine of Christ, soteriology would include “salvation accomplished” (the work of Christ) and “salvation applied” (conversion) mainly. *Sōtēria* is the Greek word for salvation.
9. *The Doctrine of Last Things* (Eschatology). This area of study concerns itself with Bible prophecy and would include questions about the Millennium, dispensations, the tribulation, etc. *Eschatos* is the Greek word for “last.”
10. *The Doctrine of the Church* (Ecclesiology). Two subjects must be discussed under this study: the Body of Christ and the local assembly. Both are called “Assembly” in Scripture and fall under the same category, but they are two different entities that must be considered separately. The Greek word for “assembly” is *ekklēsia*.

The Purpose of Doing Theology

Why should we study theology anyway? Mainly, we study it, because it is in our Bibles. God has revealed Himself, and regardless of how we feel or not, we are obligated to respond when God speaks. We are called to tremble at God's word (Is. 66:4). We don't have a say in whether or not this is necessary. We study theology, because we must!

Of course, the reasons go deeper than that. We also do theology to know God. “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true; and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.” (1 Jn. 5:20). Some think God can be understood apart from doctrine and

meaningful study. He cannot. God is known through revelation, not feelings or even experiences (unless informed by doctrine). If we don't have doctrine, we don't have God. Period. This is what we have been brought into by salvation: we are saved so that we can know God (John 17:3). In theology, we are really just advancing in the potential which salvation presents to us: it is an extension of our eternal life.

But further, we do theology, because we have a desperate need to know and defend what Scripture teaches. This is what Jude spoke of in his letter: "Beloved... it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort that you should earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all time delivered unto the saints." To defend the faith (the embodiment what we believe) we must know it. But without theology, we have nothing to believe. We are just left with subjective experiences which nobody can firmly cling to. This is why we must study theology.

Theology is the Most Dignified Study

Studying theology is not only a duty, but it is a privilege and a dignified occupation. Actually, the Lord Himself shows us this in that He taught the first systematic theology lesson: "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:27). These dear souls cherished their experience, because they were near unto Christ's heart: "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (v. 32). This should be our experience. We have the opportunity to be occupied with and taught by the infinite God of Heaven! How can this not be the most dignified study?

But we can ask further, how is this not the most worthwhile study? After all, if God is in everything, studying Him will not fail to give perspective and guidance in every aspect of life. In nature, we can appreciate His beauty. In viewing society, we can make sense of its failure. History can suddenly have purpose in our eyes. Science can show us the orderliness of God. Everything is affected by our view of God. Man spends thousands of dollars in pursuit of knowledge, and for the most part, that is composed of theories made by fellow man. God calls man's wisdom "foolishness," while His own wisdom stands true. Thus, if the world pursues mere foolishness at great lengths, what should limit our pursuit of God? He is the essence of our greatest learning! To consider Him is the only way to fully obey the command to love our God with all our mind.

The Effects of Studying Theology

To the same extent that this study has dignity, it also has unfathomable effect. Because it was the acceptance of truth that brought us salvation, it will be the study of truth that confirms us in it. It proves and allows for a proper relationship with God: "Whosoever transgresses, and abides not in the doctrine of Christ, has not God. He that abides in the doctrine of Christ, he has both the Father and the Son." (2 Jn. 1:9). Not only that, but it sanctifies the believer, making him holy for God: "Sanctify them by Your truth: Your Word is Truth." (Jn. 17:17). It preserves the believer: "Take heed unto yourself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this you will both save yourself, and them that hear you." (1 Tim. 4:16). It gives the believer an understanding of God's promises, allowing him to take hold of those promises in trial. It matures the believer: "But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by

reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." (Heb. 5:14). If Scripture is our spiritual food, apart from understanding it, we will wither and fade as believers.

But on a larger scale, theology will affect collective Christian testimony. For teachers, who bear the standard of Christianity, there must be solid doctrine: "Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." (Tit. 1:9). And in reality, every believer bears the standard in one way or another. This must be a doctrine-based standard. Doctrine is the starting point of the Christian life in everything, whether that be in discerning error, walking in truth, leading others, or any other practical duty. We are not subscribing to real Christianity if we don't understand the Christianity of the Bible. Anti-theological religion is merely man-made ideology. If we don't know what is and what is not from God in our belief system, we have no guarantee that there is any legitimacy in our claim to know God. Theology is vital.

So then, are you ready for radical study? Are you ready to plunge yourself into the depths of knowing God? Your pursuit will never find its end and your efforts will never find rest, for the knowledge of God will never be exhausted. But you can be guaranteed this: the knowledge of God will satisfy. How much will it satisfy? How great an effect will it take? No one knows, because there is always more to be attained when it comes to pursuing God. Why not test the limits then? Why not be extreme in your devotion? Why not make the essence of your life to know God? Plunge without reserve into the bottomless depths of God's truth. Begin measuring the vastness of His Being and see if you can ever touch the brink of its infinity. Be a theologian, then. Behold your God!