



INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY

Rev. Dr John M. Brentnall

Introduction

As you begin your studies in theology, seek the guidance and blessing of God, continuing in that spirit while you work in the field, thank Him for whatever you are enabled to do. However inadequate you may feel, remember the words of the missionary John Eliot: "Prayer, pains and faith in Jesus Christ can do anything." Or, to quote the apostle Paul, "Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5.24).

Know first that theology may be divided into numerous branches. For brevity, we mention but the following: Exegetical Theology, Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, Historical Theology, Church History, and Practical or Pastoral Theology.

1. Exegetical Theology

Accepting the biblical and Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, we seek to build all our theological thinking on the Bible, the written Word of God. Our business is therefore simply to teach what the Bible says.

From among all the mediaeval accretions of superstition and tradition, there emerged during the Renaissance and Reformation the principle known as *ad fontes* (to the sources). The Reformers said in effect that if we are to teach what the Bible says, we must read it for ourselves. Yet we cannot do this without knowing the languages in which it was written. In His unfathomable wisdom, God has given us His Word mainly in Hebrew and Greek (with a minimum of Aramaic). "Hence," says J. Gresham Machen, "if we want to know the Scriptures, to the study of Greek and Hebrew we must go!" If we can read Scripture not merely in translation, but as it was

given to the Church by the Holy Spirit, then we are equipped (at least linguistically) to interpret and teach it to others.

This branch of study is termed biblical exegesis, or the discipline of Exegetical Theology. This entails simply deducing or bringing out what is already in the Bible; that is, to interpret and explain what God is saying to us in His Word. It is now widely recognized that all theological disciplines should spring from the study of the actual text of Holy Scripture. So, William G. T. Shedd affirms: “The first step to be taken is to deduce the doctrine itself from Scripture by careful exegesis . . . Consequently, the interpretation of Scripture is the very first work of the theologian.”

In addressing ourselves to this task, we urge the handling of the sacred text with loving reverence and thorough care, praying: “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.” (Psalm 119:18)

With diligent application and prayerful dependence on God, the task of theology will not prove as difficult as it sounds. For the most part, the Bible is a plain book, and most of it takes the form of narrative. Furthermore, its vocabulary, especially the Hebrew, is not vast. Also, we are privileged, at least in the developed countries, to have available many lexicons to explain to us the original languages, and even more exegetical commentaries to guide us in our exposition of the Biblical text. Most valuable of all, we have the promise of the Holy Spirit, who first indited it in the hearts of the human penmen, to lead us into the truth.

2. Biblical Theology

In learning to read and to digest the Word of God, we ponder how to group its teachings. Theologians have come up with two main ways. The first of these is known as Biblical Theology.

Biblical Theology sees Holy Scripture as an unfolding revelation and seeks to answer the question: “What does the Bible teach in the

order of time in which its truths were revealed?" This branch of theology traces the history of God's dealings with mankind as it unfolds from the opening of Genesis in the Old Testament to the close of the Book of Revelation in the New. John Owen's *Biblical Theology*, Jonathan Edwards's *History of Redemption* and Geerhardus Vos's *Biblical Theology* are excellent guides in this field.

Quite apart from being natural, Biblical Theology possesses a distinct advantage over all other branches of theological study: it keeps before our minds the basic truth that the whole Bible is grounded in history. It is a record of what God, acting in mercy and in judgment, has done in human history. Everything we read in Holy Scripture, while not necessarily historical narrative (note, for example, the Old Testament's wisdom literature), is nevertheless fitted into a historical framework and points to a historical climax: the Second Coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This final redemptive event ushers in eternity.

The scope of Biblical Theology is vast. As Jonathan Edwards says, it includes the display of God's righteousness both in the salvation of His Church from generation to generation and in the putting of God's enemies under His feet in such a way that His goodness will appear to all in its triumph over evil. It involves the reversal of all the effects of the Fall of Man into sin and the gathering of all the elect into one in Christ, and all to the glory of the Triune God.

3. Systematic Theology

The second way of grouping the Biblical information is known as Systematic Theology. It is no less Biblical than Biblical Theology, but it links the great themes of the Bible logically rather than historically. It views the Bible as a completed revelation and seeks to answer the question: "What does Holy Scripture teach about the subjects God has there revealed in their logical relationships?"

The task of the systematic theologian is therefore to "ascertain, collect and combine all the facts which God has revealed concerning

Himself and our relation to Him.” (Charles Hodge) Beginning with what God says about Himself (Theology proper), we try to trace out what He says about Himself in relation to Man (anthropology); to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Christology); to Salvation, both accomplished and applied (Soteriology); to His Church, the special object of His favour (Ecclesiology); and to the Last Things that intimately concern us all: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell (Eschatology)—and all these in their natural, logical order.

This must be done humbly. In every department we are liable to err. Every doctrinal error and heresy springs from a partial or distorted view of the facts of the Bible. How we need God to fulfil His promise to us: “I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye” (Psalm 32:8)!

We seek to collect and group these facts as thoroughly as possible. Being both finite and sinful, we can never produce an exhaustive science of theology.¹ God is infinitely beyond us, and His ways are in the deep. Yet we must seek His help to take the facts of Holy Scripture as they are and to construct with as much integrity and balance as we can the system of theology we believe to arise from Scripture.

Also, we must always avoid imposing our own pre-conceived ideas on the facts. The moment we do this, we cease to be theologians and become philosophers. We must pray to be made like the Puritan John Hieron, of whom his biographer quaintly writes: “He had Logic and Philosophy enough, but he planted no Aristotle’s grove by the side of God’s altar.” We must prophesy according to the proportion of faith, compare spiritual things with spiritual and write as the

¹ The phrase “science of theology” is now in question in ongoing in-house Reformed discussions of the relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology. For a sketch of the unfolding of this conversation, see Tim J. R. Trumper, “John Frame’s Methodology: A Case Study in Constructive Calvinism,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*. Edited by John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 145–172. Ed.

Lord's messengers in the Lord's message. Unless we do this, we shall make havoc of the entire system of revealed truth.

At this point, we must make it clear that we believe that the great body of truth gathered from Holy Scripture is nothing less than the Reformed Faith.² We make this claim because, following centuries of burial beneath the rubbish of mediaeval tradition and superstition, Biblical truth was recovered and its organization enhanced during the glorious 16th century Protestant Reformation by such Reformers as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, Peter Martyr, William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer. The Evangelical Confessions and Catechisms formulated in Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland and Britain enshrine a theology as faithful to the Word of God as anything that has ever been proposed as an expression of the Faith of Christ. They reject out of hand all subjective theories fished from the polluted pond of man's unregenerate mind, and convey to us, as far as is humanly possible, the unadulterated truth of God. Being incorporated into the testimony of so many Reformed churches, they form subordinate standards of faith from which church leaders and members can draw as faithful summaries of Biblical doctrine.

This noble historic faith has been bequeathed to us by the Reformers and their successors. What J. Gresham Machen stated in 1929, we state today: "Glorious is the heritage of the Reformed Faith. God grant that it may go forth to new triumphs even in the present time of unbelief!"

The Systematic Theologies of John Brown of Haddington, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Charles Hodge, W. G. T. Shedd, Robert L. Dabney, Louis Berkhof and Robert Reymond, beside others,³ plus the numerous treatments of particular doctrines now available to us, well represent this Reformed heritage.

² Alternatively stated, the Reformed faith is the highest expression of Biblical truth. Ed.

³ The number of Reformed Systematic Theologies of various lengths and depths continues to increase, including those by James M. Boice, Douglas Kelly, John Frame, Robert Letham, and Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley. Ed.

4. Historical Theology

In the kind providence of God, the same faith that was once delivered to the saints by Christ and His apostles has been wonderfully preserved through the centuries by its continued proclamation and defence by His Church. The branch of theology covering this historic development is called Historical Theology. It handles the leading doctrines of the Faith from the viewpoint of the various parties involved in controversy, and is taught with a view to vindicating Biblical truth in its Reformed expression over against all error. In this branch of theology William Cunningham's *Historical Theology*, William Shedd's *History of Christian Doctrine* and Louis Berkhof's *History of Christian Doctrines* are classics. Nicholas Needham has produced a reliable modern survey of theology down the ages in *2,000 Years of Christ's Power*.

The creeds, confessions, catechisms and writings of those whom God has raised up during the history of His Church find their place in Historical Theology. We accept these superb historic documents and testimonies as living proof of the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed, the Canons and Decrees of Dort, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster standards and the Heidelberg Catechism are monumental bulwarks that God has made part of our heritage against heresy; while the writings of Athanasius, Augustine, the Protestant Reformers, the English and American Puritans, the Scottish Covenanters and their successors are theological giants whom God trained to stand in the breach when the walls of His Zion were assailed.

Still, we must never substitute these worthy standards and writers for the Holy Scriptures themselves. The Word of God written is the only perfect and infallible revelation that God has given us to His own glory and our salvation. From it we must never deviate one hair's breadth. Some have done so to their own and their churches' tragic loss.

Historical Theology naturally includes Apologetics, which seeks to defend the Christian Faith over against internal heresies and errors, and external threats from the cults and the false ethnic religions. The Mediaeval School-man Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, William Paley's *Evidences*, Butler's *Analogy of Religion* and Blaise Pascal's *Provincial Letters* against the Jesuits belong to this department. None of these are satisfactory from a Reformed viewpoint. They depend far too much on natural reason to commend themselves to believers. Cunningham, Shedd and Berkhof are far more useful.⁴

5. Church History

Among the great defenders of the faith stands a noble army of selfless disciples and martyrs of Christ whose testimony constitutes one of the most rewarding studies of all. The way in which they adorned the religion of their Saviour has produced a separate branch of learning known simply as Church History.

This branch of theology—theology exemplified in godliness—can teach us much, for it shows us truth wrought out in life and overcoming the most hostile forces. Some defenders of the faith we hold in special affection, yet of all of them it may be said that the world was not worthy of them. Battling against worldly ways all around them, and resisting the apostasy of the church that often persecuted them, they climbed the hill of holiness to heights that put us to shame. The record of such stalwarts is in heaven.

We cannot commend too highly the volumes that faithfully and lovingly portray their lives and describe their deaths. John Foxe's

⁴ Largely under the influence of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), Apologetics has become a branch of theology in its own right, as can be seen from the departments and curricula of some Reformed seminaries. Whereas, in such instances, Historical Theology is woven throughout the respective teaching of both Church History and Apologetics, Apologetics focuses on how to defend the Faith of Christ and on the contemporary “isms” and religions against which Christianity is to be defended. We could wish, however, that the study of Apologetics focused more on courageously defending the faith than on endless in-house theorizing of the best way to do so. Ed.

Book of Martyrs, John Howie's *Scots Worthies*, Merle d'Aubigne's *History of the Reformation*, James Wylie's *History of Protestantism*, William Hetherington's *History of the Westminster Assembly*, along with the many biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and letters of God's saints now available, should be compulsory reading for all Christians. Few things show us the sovereignty of God and the power of His grace more than the history of the church.

6. Practical or Pastoral Theology

Because God had commanded us to go and teach all nations, we feel the need to consider such topics as preaching, pastoral care, missions and evangelism, church government, the conducting of public worship, family relationships, Christian ethics and other aspects of Christian living.⁵ For decades "the subject was hardly regarded as a theological discipline on a level with the others, and in practice it was a hotch-potch of advice on preaching, pastoral visitation and Church government, with 'sacred elocution' and Church music added from time to time." (Duncan B. Forrester) More recently, however, it has been developed into a rigorous theology of practice.

Naturally, we need to place most emphasis on preaching, worship, church government and the care of souls. The reasons for this are so important: first, we have a message to declare: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). This is the heart of the glorious Gospel of our gracious God. Then we have a divine commission: "Preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:2). Then we have a burning desire to proclaim it, for "the love of Christ constrains us" (2 Corinthians 5:14) and "knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Corinthians 5:11). Then we have a divine command: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40). This command refers especially to church government and to worship. Finally, we long to see the great truths of God burnt into people's

⁵ In some seminaries, church government and Christian ethics are dealt with in the discipline of Systematic Theology.

hearts so as to produce holy lives. Such lives are produced by the Holy Spirit's application of divine truth (John 17:17). Our doctrine is the doctrine according to godliness.

And so we must make use of as many lawful helps as we can to make our message reach the hearts and minds of those to whom God sends us. While these helps cannot make us preachers and pastors—only God can do that—they are useful for pointing out some of the errors we should avoid and for granting us lofty aims as faithful and effective ministers of the new covenant.

In this branch of study, William Shedd's *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, Charles Spurgeon's *Lectures to my Students*, Charles Bridges's *The Christian Ministry*, along with such biographies as those of Joseph Alleine and Robert Murray M'Cheyne will prove to be invaluable.

Conclusion

Each branch of study is highly specialized, and demands our commitment if we are to progress in understanding and in proclaiming the Faith of Christ. Since God promises to always be with his people, we draw light, strength and comfort from his assurance that, so long as we think, feel, speak and live by His Word, He will guide us, keep us, bless us and make us a blessing to others. In this light, we urge one another, in the words of the apostle Paul, Brethren, "pray for us, that the Word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you" (2 Thessalonians 3:1).

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INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY  
Test Yourself!

1. What are the main branches or disciplines of Christian theology?
2. Summarize the role of each branch or discipline in Christian theology?
3. What is the principle of *sola scriptura*?
4. Why and how do we use creeds, confessions of faith, catechisms, given our belief in the principle of *sola scriptura*?
5. Why do you think the study of theology is a worthwhile commitment?
6. How do you intend to study Christian theology without becoming “puffed up” (1 Corinthians 8:1)?

Closing prayer: “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Psalm 119:18).