

“Introduction: A Biblical Understanding of Theology”

Prov. 1:7; Psalm 131

Purpose:

Your students will come to a biblical understanding of the importance and nature of the task of studying theology.

In a Nutshell:

Like it or not, willingly or no, everyone is a theologian. For us as God’s creatures, placed in God’s world, and bearers of the image of God, God is simply inescapable. We are like Him, we think about Him, we respond to Him, and we are sustained by Him. As Paul told the polytheists of Athens about their unknown God, “In him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Some, like the men of Athens, have many theologies, but every man has a theology – his set of conclusions about God. The wonderful thing about the God unknown to Athens, however, is that He desires to make Himself known. Paul describes that desire: “That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us” (v. 27). This lesson focuses on answering three preliminary questions: “What is theology?”, “How should theology be done?”, and “Why do theology well?”.

To the Testimony!

What Is Theology?

Prov. 2:1-6
9:7-12
30:1-6

1. In tenth grade you have taken or will take a course called *Biology*. That word means *the study of life*, and the course involves studying animals and plants through experimentation and observation. *Theology* comes from the Greek word *theos*, which means *God*. What then does *theology* mean?

Answer: The word *theology* means *the study of God*.

Application: When we compare the word *theology* to the word *biology*, we immediately sense that we must mean something more than *the study of God* by that term. To speak of studying God as a theologian the way a biologist would study life is to misunderstand the context of the task. A scientist can peer into a microscope and examine his specimen as he studies it. As we study our God, however, it is actually we who are the specimens under the microscope (Prov. 30:2-4). For this reason, Scripture always closely connects the fear of the Lord with the knowledge of God (Prov. 2:5, 9:10). A reverent fear of the Lord is the beginning of all knowledge, but this is especially true when it comes to learning and knowing theology.

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Prov. 2:5 2. The Bible never uses the phrase *study God*. The phrase we do see repeated in the Bible is *the knowledge of God*. How is the knowledge of God different from the study of God?
9:10
30:3

Answer: One key difference is that the knowledge of God or knowing God is personal and experiential, whereas studying God can be very impersonal and academic.

Application: Theology is an academic discipline that is not an academic exercise. Every act of a theologian doing theology should be an act of worship, ultimately (see Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), p. 19, IV.D). The goal is to know God, not merely to know about Him. To know Him is to reverence Him with a godly fear. In his *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1887), James Petigru Boyce counseled that the work of would-be theologians must be accompanied with the following characteristics: (1) “with reverence for truth, and especially the truth taught in the Word of God”; (2) “with earnest prayer for divine help”; (3) “with careful searching of heart against prejudice”; (4) “with timidity, as to the reception and propagation of new doctrine”; (5) “but with a spirit willing and anxious to examine, and to accept whatever we may be convinced is true”; and (6) “with teachable humility, which, knowing that God has not taught us in his Word all the truth that exists, not even all the truth on many a single point, accepts with implicit faith all that he has taught, and awaits his own time for that more full revelation which shall remove all our present perplexities” (Quoted in Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity* (Allen Park, MI: DBTS, 2008), 1:33-34].

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How Should Theology Be Done?

Prov. 1:7 3. Scientists often think that they can find any answer they wish to have simply through their research and study. We know that science has often been wrong, but that does not shake the faith of many confident scientists. Read Psalm 131:1
Psalm 131 -3. Should we act like a laboratory full of confident scientists as we do theo-

gy? What does this passage say we ought to act like when we study God? Why?

Answer: We should act like weaned children, not like confident scientists, when we do theology. The reason is that there are some things about God that are too high for us.

Application: Child-like faith is necessary to entrance into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3), and it is also necessary to the task of theology. The humble psalmist determined not to involve himself in great matters or things too high for him. We need that same determination. We need to understand our limitations as theologians. Rolland McCune lists four "limitations of theology": (1) "the finiteness of human understanding" (Job 11:7, Rom. 11:33); (2) the limits of human language; (3) spiritual immaturity (Heb. 5:11-14, 2 Pet. 3:16); and (4) "the silence of written revelation" (Deut. 29:29; see question 6).

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Heb. 4. A biologist uses microscopes and computers in order to find the knowledge and truths he is looking for. What tool must one use in order to find the knowledge and truth of God?
11:6

Answer: The tool the theologian must use is faith.

Application: Note that the author mentions two things that must be believed by the one seeking the knowledge of God: (1) that God exists, and (2) that God rewards the seeker, meaning that He reveals Himself so that the seeker finds Him. F.F. Bruce puts it this way: "The reward desired by those who seek Him is the joy of finding Him; He Himself proves to be their 'exceeding joy' (Ps. 43:4)" [*The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 290]. In other words, we must be ready to take God at His Word. Our founding fathers held certain truths to be self-evident. The Bible tells us that there are really only two such truths – God is, and God’s Word is true. God’s existence and Word are self-evident, because there is no higher authority than God that is more credible on these questions. God is simply the highest authority to which one can appeal. This is why we must begin with faith in God and His Word.

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Heb. 5. Define *faith*.
11:1-3
11:7-13

Answer: Faith is very simply believing God’s Word. God’s Word tells us of truth that we cannot know through observation. We can only know it through His revelation.

Application: The author of Hebrews emphasizes that faith is the opposite of sight. So “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (v. 1). The worlds were made from unseen things, and we know this by faith (v. 3). Noah believed things not yet seen (v. 7). Abraham went out without seeing where he was going (v. 8). In fact, the city he was looking for could not be seen in this earthly existence (v. 10). Faith is believing God’s promise; it is the ability to see what cannot be seen because it is far off (v. 13).

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Interesting Insight!

“‘Faith’ vs. Faith”

“One must analyse [*sic*] the word Faith and see that it can mean two completely opposite things.

“Supposing we were climbing in the Alps and were very high on the bare rock and suddenly the fog shuts down. The guide turns to us and says that the ice is forming and that there is no hope and that before morning we will all freeze to death here on the shoulder of the mountain. Simply to keep warm, the guide keeps us moving in the dense fog further out on the shoulder until none of us have any idea where we are. After an hour or so, someone says to the guide: ‘Supposing I drop and hit a ledge ten feet down in the fog. What would happen then?’ The guide would say that you might make it till the morning and thus live. So, with absolutely no knowledge or any reason to support this action, one of the group hangs and drops into the fog. This would be one kind of faith, a leap of faith.

“Supposing, however, after we have worked out on the shoulder in the midst of the fog and the growing ice on the rock, we had stopped and we heard a voice and the voice said: ‘You cannot see me, but I know exactly where you are from your voices. I am on another ridge. I have lived in these mountains man and boy for over sixty years and I know every foot of them. I assure you that ten feet below you there is a ledge. If you hang and drop, you can make it through the night and I will get you in the morning.’

“I would not hang and drop at once, but would ask questions to try and ascertain if the man knew what he was talking about and if he was not my enemy. In the Alps for example, I

would ask him his name. If the name he gave me was the name of a family from that part of the mountains, it would count a great deal to me. In the Swiss Alps there are certain family names that indicate mountain families of that area. For example, in the area of the Alps where I live, such a name would be that of Avanthey. In my desperate situation, even though time would be running out, I would ask him what to me would be the sufficient questions, and when I became convinced by his answers, then I would hang and drop." [Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), pp. 124-125.]

1 Cor. 1:18 2:6-16 5. What must be true about a man or woman or young person before they can begin to understand what is true about God?

Answer: One must be saved before becoming a theologian.

Application: Note the importance of revelation to understanding God's wisdom (1 Cor. 2:9-10). Sensory perception and human imagination fall short (v. 9). The natural man apart from God's revelation has no ability to know God's wisdom (v. 14). Consequently, those who know that wisdom do so because God's Spirit has revealed it to them (vv. 15-16). A man must be saved to be more than a natural man.

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Deut. 29:29 6. What two categories of truth does Moses mention in this verse? Which category belongs to us, and why specifically did God give us that category of truth?

Answer: The two categories of truth are the secret things and the things revealed. Both categories are true, but only the revealed things belong to us and our children.

Application: The reason God has put us in possession of revealed truth is so that we may conform to truth—"do all the words of this law." Knowing God is pointless, even impossible, without a willingness to obey God, because obeying God is why He has given us His word. It is interesting that the verse mentions that we possess the revealed things forever. Evidently, even when we are glorified, the secret things will still belong only to the Lord to some degree.

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Why Do Theology Well?

Eph. 4:11-16 7. What is the happy result of the lives of those who understand the truth they believe and who live it?

Answer: These results include mature Christlikeness (v. 13), stability in a world of deceivers (v. 14), and the increase of Christ's body, the church, in love (v. 16).

Application: Doing theology well is essential for healthy churches, full of mature, Christ-like, stable, loving believers. This should be the goal of every theologian. The local church is the pillar and ground of the truth in this day and age (1 Tim. 3:15). It is essential to this mission that we emphasize understanding what we believe and committing ourselves to earnestly contending for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

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Hos. 4:1-6 8. What is the sad result of the lives of those who reject the truth of God and the knowledge of God?

Answer: In a word, the destruction of God's people, His work, and their future.

Application: Hosea's description of the Israel of his day has found frequent expression in descriptions of the church of our own day. David Wells put it this way: "Indeed, our generation is rapidly growing deaf to the summons of the external God. He has been so internalized, so tamed by the needs of religious commerce, so submerged beneath the traffic of modern psychological need that he has almost completely disappeared. All too often, he now leans weakly on the church, a passive bystander, a co-conspirator in the effort to dismantle two thousand years of Christian thought about God and what he has declared himself to be. That is to say, God has become weightless. The church continues its business of satisfying the needs of the self—needs defined by the individual—and God, who is himself viewed and marketed as a product, becomes powerless to change the definition of that need or to prescribe the means by which it might be satisfied. When the consumer is sovereign, the product (in this case God himself) must be subservient" [*God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 101].

He further counsels: "If we grasp the reality of God, it will be on his terms and not on our own. But without this, we can have no binding address, no revelation given once and for all and to all, no Christianity that is universal in the sense that it calls all to the same knowledge of God through the same Christ. And unless God is understood to be transcendent in his holiness, the world can have no objective moral meaning, no accountability beyond itself, no as-

urance of salvation from guilt through Christ's death, and, in the end, no assurance that God will be the final line of resistance to all that is evil. And without this assurance, the hope dies that one day truth will be put forever on the throne and evil forever on the scaffold" (p. 117).

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