



Theology: Who Needs It?

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This article originally appeared in the Fall 2009 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

Many people were happy Christians until they met a theologian," said one old-time preacher. His implication was that theology not only was unnecessary but also could be dangerous to one's spiritual life. But is that really true?

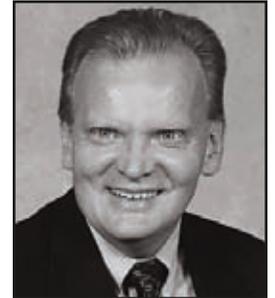
Webster's Dictionary defines the word "theology" as "the study of God and His relation to the world." It takes only a moment's reflection to realize that if someone wants to grow in knowing, loving, and serving God, it will involve at least some amount of "the study of God and His relation to the world," or, to put it more simply, study of the doctrine (teaching) and practice (daily living) taught in the Bible.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones often emphasized the biblical connection between doctrine and practice. For instance, Romans 1-11 focuses on theology and Romans 12-16 focuses on its practical applications. The transition verse, Romans 12:1, says, "Therefore my brothers, by the mercies of God, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable service." In other words, the only logical conclusion, the only adequate response to the mercies of God revealed in Romans 1-11 is to commit yourself totally. Chapters 12-16 outline what that commitment means. Even in the "doctrinal" sections, application is often present. For instance, Romans 11 ends with spontaneous worship: "Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgment and His paths beyond tracing out... For from Him and through Him and to Him be the glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:33-36). Sound teaching necessarily leads to godly living.

But the Bible's teaching must be set in its proper context if it is to be meaningful. In fact, B.B. Warfield once argued that when we fail to study the Scriptures

in a context that is in relation to the whole of biblical revelation, we lose half the spiritual impact. But when we have an understanding of the flow of redemptive history or of the great themes of Scripture, individual texts often jump off the page at us. The texts have a clarity, force, and power that they would not have otherwise. We can gain this context from the study of biblical theology (Genesis to Revelation) or systematic theology (biblical themes arranged topically), both of which are often rejected in the contemporary church. This leads not only to a diminished understanding of the text we read, but also to a spiritually weak and impoverished life.

"Yes," you say, "I guess that makes sense for pastors, but why should an ordinary believer study theology?" The primary reason for anyone studying theology is that in reality everyone is a theologian. That is, everyone has a certain set of ideas about God and His relation to the world. You can be a good theologian or a bad one, sound or heretical, informed or uninformed, but you are a theologian for good or ill. As soon as you start answering questions concerning God—such as: What is the gospel? Who is Jesus? Who is the Holy Spirit? How are we saved? What is sin? How do I live the Christian life? Is there life after death?—you are giving answers based upon ideas that you have arrived at either through careful thought or not-so-careful thought. On matters so important to ourselves and others, surely we want to be good, informed, sound theologians rather than bad, uninformed, and unsound ones.



Art Lindsley

Despite this rather obvious (but often neglected) insight, theology has a negative connotation for many within the Christian culture. With the advent of post-modernism, the influence of anti-mind, anti-rational, and anti-intellectual sympathies abound; in that light, it might be helpful to look at some of the most often heard objections to studying theology:

Doesn't theology focus too much on the mind?

Good theology focuses on the "head, heart, and hand," as someone has put it. It involves knowing, feeling, and doing. Jesus affirmed as the Great Commandment that we are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our strength, and with all our minds. You can never love God with your mind too much, just as you can never love him with your heart, soul, and strength too much.

Isn't it enough to just focus on Jesus?

Certainly Jesus Christ and what He has done for us (the gospel) is to be at the center of our focus. But, unless there is a solid understanding of who Jesus is and what His teachings mean, there can be problems. For instance, one movement in England asserted, "All we need is Jesus," and the next four generations went through every heresy of the early church. As one scholar said, "If you don't learn from the mistakes of the past, you are doomed to repeat them." Some in the church have gotten lost or gone down dead-end streets. It's valuable to have a map that shows you the best way to your destination, and for this we need the whole Bible.

Aren't there great dangers in theology—pride, diversion, and dryness?

Yes, these can sometimes be problems. But an argument against abuse is not an argument against use. In 1 Corinthians 8:3, it says, "We all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant but love edifies. If any one supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know, but if any one loves God, he is known by Him." Clearly, knowledge without love can lead to pride. Thus, seeking knowledge for its own sake or for mere curiosity has always been seen as dangerous by the great saints and theologians. Safety is found in humbly seeking first and foremost to know and love God and to serve others through a deeper knowledge of His word, in prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

Doesn't Paul say in I Cor. 2:2 that he was determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified?

Yes. However, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:6 (four verses later), "Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature." Later, in 1 Corinthians 3:1, he says, "I could not speak to you as spiritual men, but as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it." So it seems that Paul stayed with the ABCs (milk) because they weren't ready for more.

Surely you don't believe in a system of theology—isn't that modernist?

If God has a consistent character and can meaningfully reveal Himself, then it must be possible to organize these truths in a coherent way. If God were contradictory, it would be impossible to know Him because everything you could affirm about Him you could also negate. It would also make any revelation about Him impossible to understand.

Aren't all our problems because we have too much theology?

That's a common idea. First theology is neglected, then deliberately deemphasized, then regarded as unimportant, then viewed as dispensable. The problem is that another "theology" takes its place. And those who follow it become more conformed to the culture or to a charismatic leader.

Doesn't the Bible emphasize the heart rather than the mind?

The word *heart* (especially in the Old Testament) is used many more times than *mind*. However, the biblical term for heart includes the mind. There is no divorce between the two in Scripture.

How much theology should you know?

The Apostle Paul recommends the "whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27). In fact, Paul says that because he gave the Ephesians the "whole purpose of God," he is "innocent of the blood of all men" (Acts 20:26). Paul spent about three years in Ephesus, which gives a general idea of how much time it took for the Ephesians to learn about the whole purpose of God.

What is this "whole purpose of God"?

It's not possible to say exactly what Paul's curriculum contained. We can be confident that it would have been well-grounded in both the Old Testament and the teachings of Christ proclaimed by the original Apostles, plus what Christ personally revealed to Paul. And of course, the major focus would have been Christ. We probably get a good idea of what Paul focused on from

reading his epistles (Romans, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy, etc.). Since these epistles are just short summaries, imagine how much Paul could teach given three years (Acts 20:31) and regular sessions “publicly, and from house to house” (Acts 20:20), as well as individual meetings admonishing “each one with tears” (Acts 20:31). Also note that he stresses that he did not “shrink back” (vs. 20 and 27) from teaching them anything that was profitable, including difficult—hard to hear—teaching.

Why is this thorough, comprehensive teaching so important?

First, it is life-giving and also protects against teaching and practice that would endanger our souls. Paul warns about savage wolves that would come to take away the flock (vs. 29). These are other religious movements and philosophies coming in from the outside. Then there are those who rise up from inside the church (false teachers) determined “to draw away the disciples after them” (vs. 30). Not only do these teachers give false, destructive content, but they are also self-centered, focused on gaining a following—“after them.”

Isn't Paul's emphasis here harsh and judgmental?

Not if it is done in love. Paul says he offered his teaching “with tears” (vs. 31). He showed them so much love that the Ephesians came to love him deeply. When he left them, “they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him” (vs. 37).

What difference would it make if we didn't have sound teaching?

Solid teaching gives life and protects from harm. It leads us to a way of life and establishes us in our identities as believers. Take 1 Peter 2:9-10: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a people for God's own possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Note that it is said that “once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.” Any basis for our identity, whether racial, ethnic, political, or national, pales into insignificance compared to who we are in Christ.

Aren't some theologians living in an ivory tower—just living in their minds?

Certainly some are; however, this is not true of all. The English puritans such as William Ames defined

theology as “living to God.” This means that the best theologian is the one who lives best. Jonathan Edwards just adds a couple of words to this definition: “Theology is living to God in Christ.” Jesus stresses that it is not enough to just know or hear His words. You must act on them. He says that the one who hears and acts on His words builds on a foundation of rock, and the one who hears but doesn't act accordingly builds without a foundation. When the river bursts, the house collapses and is ruined (Luke 6:46-49). This river represents tragic events that happen in our personal and public lives. There are many who hear and don't act on it, or who don't hear because they were never taught. Either way, the lack of a foundation has devastating consequences.

Why do we need theology? Because the failure to know biblical teaching and apply it to our lives is a threat to us personally and to the church in our time. The truth is that everyone has a theology; the only question is whether it is sound and life-giving or faulty and dangerous. Let us then build our lives on the foundation of Holy Scripture, with special attention to the teaching of Christ and His delegated agents—the Apostles. Only thus will we be able to truly know, love, and serve God with faithfulness in our generation.

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