

## CHAPTER I - PROLEGOMENA TO THEOLOGY

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### I . INTRODUCTION

To some people, *theology* is a queen that reigns over the sciences. To some people theology is the “words of God,” or at least they respect it as man’s thoughts about God. Other people reject the word *theology* because it means dead orthodoxy, and in some churches, theology has taken the place of Christ and the Bible. To others, theology is equated with liberalism. Still there are some who attack theology because they feel it will stifle their soul-winning zeal.

The great evangelist Dwight L. Moody often accused theology of being the sterile wrapper of Christianity. He once said, “Feeding on doctrine is like trying to live on dry husks.” Then he went on to add, “I pity a person who has to be fed religion with a theological spoon.”

“I don’t like your theology!” a woman once said to Dwight L. Moody. He laughed, “Theology!” he said to the lady, “I didn’t know that I had any theology.” Even though Moody was reacting to dead theology, he had a living theology of his own. Anytime someone takes several Scripture verses and synthesizes them into one sermon or Sunday school lesson, he is constructing a theology. Therefore, when Moody took several references to Jesus Christ in Scriptures and gave his listeners a broad picture of the Son of God, he was theologizing. Moody understood the cohesive glue that held theology together, and he emphasized the ultimate aim of theology. He said, “A creed is a road or street. It is very good as far as it goes, but if it doesn’t take us to Christ, it is worthless.”<sup>1</sup>

This volume is an attempt to present in a systematic, comprehensive and complete form the doctrines of God and His works. But the aim is to go beyond a theological statement of belief. It is an attempt to give theology a heart, which is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christianity begins with the statement, “In the beginning God . . . .” Since every finite thing has to begin somewhere, an excellent place to begin one’s study is with God. But what about the preparations we must make before we get started? Just as there are many things to prepare before the driver starts his car on a race day, so there are attitudes, tools and assumptions that go before the study of theology. This preparation is called *prolegomena*, which means “things that are said before.” Therefore, prolegomena is the introduction to the study of theology because it comes first and gives direction to the formation of one’s belief. Prolegomena comes from the Greek word *πρῶ* “before” and *λεγω* “to say.” Just as the blueprints will determine the shape of the building to be constructed, so your attitude and principles of studying theology will determine your doctrinal position. Even the words and definitions you use to answer the question “What is theology?” will determine the way you express your faith and its content.

Prolegomena deals with your presuppositions, which are the attitude you bring to the question, “What is theology?” It is similar to people who say in the contemporary world, “I know where you are coming from.” They are describing an approach to a topic.

Prolegomena begins with the presuppositions that there is a God, that truth exists, and that a person can know truth. Therefore, as we begin our study, we assume there is a God and that the truth exists with Him. We assume we can know the truth, hence we can know about God or even come to know Him directly. These presuppositions are not proof, nor are they evidence for truth. But as we continue our study, we will find evidence that verifies our presuppositions. Here it is important to make a distinction between the existence of our presuppositions and later demonstrating the validity of our presuppositions. In so doing, we are constructing theology.

A. WHAT IS THEOLOGY? In approaching the subject of theology, we must first define the word. Not everyone means the same thing by using the term *theology*.

1. *Greek etymology.* First, the term theology comes from the Greek compound *theologia* (θεολογία) derived from two roots, *theos* (θεός—“God”) and *logos* (λόγος—“word ” or “idea”). Theology originally meant an idea concerning God. The original term fell into two categories. Theology could be sayings about God, or the actual sayings, or discourses by God or the gods.

2. *Pagan usage.* Plato (427-347 B.C.) used the word *theology* in connection with *statements* that he found in the poems about the gods. His master teacher, Socrates—who was often criticized—apparently wanted the gods to be more godly. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) used the word *theology* as a synonym of metaphysics or as a study of the realm beyond the physical. To him, theology was a rational explanation of all that concerned the Supreme Mind.

3. *Early Christian usage.* Christians were reluctant at first to use the term *theology* because of its pagan association. Their original discussion of theology, even though they did not use the term, revolved around the humanity of Jesus Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity. Christians examined the issues and arrived at conclusions about the object of their faith before they used the term *theology* to identify the method and content of their faith.

4. *Clergy.* During the fourth and fifth centuries, theology became a study of the content that every priest should know before he became pastor of a church. Chrysostom (A.D. 407) said a priest should not only be as virtuous as angels, but also proficient in knowledge of ordination to study both scriptural content and external scriptural tradition (that stemming from apostolic practice and teaching but was not grounded in Scripture). This study later became known as theology. Augustine, a contemporary of Chrysostom, wrote a book for ministers entitled *On Christian Doctrine*. In this volume he advocated not only the mastery of original biblical languages, but the techniques of reasoning and

persuasion, and also mastery of subjects such as history, natural science, mechanical arts and numbers (mathematics).

These topics were all included in the study of theology, but its study was confined to the clergy. After the fifth century, the study of theology spread beyond the monastery to church members.

5. *Contemporary usage.* To answer the question “What is theology?” we must examine how theologians used the word, no matter how others define it. A theologian defines the term *theology* when he says, “I am going to use the term *theology* to mean . . . .” But this does not mean he is right. Different theologians will differ in their definition of the term. Also, these definitions will not necessarily relate to the historic uses of the term.

Strong and Fitzwater both define theology in their respective works in keeping with the etymology of the term. Strong writes, “Theology is the science of God and the relations between God and the universe.”<sup>2</sup> Fitzwater’s definition is similar, but more confining. He concludes, “Theology, therefore, is the science of God’s essential being and His relationship to the universe as set forth in the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>3</sup> Both writers take note of the fact that other theologians define theology as “the science of religion” or “the doctrines of the church.”

6. *Catechism and theology.* Many have tried to answer the question “What is theology?” by setting theology within a scheme of questions and answers. As a result, throughout their discourses about theology, a person is given a question so that he may give a proper doctrinal answer. The study of theology, stimulated by a question, is thought to challenge the mind to explore an obvious answer. But there are problems with this method, known as the catechism. Over the years, the answers become catalogued, and neither the questions nor the answers are any longer spontaneous. That which was created to be a vehicle to challenge the mind, usually dulled the senses because the answer was memorized rather than analyzed.

7. *Theology and doctrine.* Blackwood defined doctrine as “an intellectual formulation of an experience.”<sup>4</sup> But this is a limited definition. In one sense, doctrine and theology are similar, but theology cannot be limited to doctrine. Doctrine is usually defined as the study of God that arises from the Bible. Theology is generally defined as the study of God from all sources. Doctrine is a New Testament term used as both a verb and a noun. The verb is usually translated *to teach* (Acts 5:42), whereas the noun, translated “doctrine” (Acts 2:42), refers to the actual content being taught. Teaching is the process—doctrine is the product. In contemporary usage, doctrine is, in fact, limited to teaching from special revelation (i.e., the Scriptures), whereas theology may draw its source, method or proof from any and all sources of truth (logic, arithmetic, biology, history, etc.), because all truth (both special revelation and general revelation) comes from God.

Writing in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Thomas Rees identified the similarities that exist between doctrine and dogma in Greek theology.

In Gr[EEK] theology ‘doctrine’ and ‘dogma’ meant the same thing. Each had its origin in the opinion of some great teacher; each rested upon revelation and claimed its authority; each meant an exposition of a particular truth of the gospel, and of the whole of Christian truth, which the church adopted as the only right exposition.<sup>5</sup>

8. *Religion and theology.* The word *religion* comes from the Latin *religare* which means “to bind up.” Whereas religion commonly refers to a set of beliefs, attitudes, and practices expressed in worship of God, theology usually deals with the systematic collection and arrangement of one’s beliefs.

The study of religion is used in at least three different ways. First, the study of religion is the study of any person who has beliefs in, attitudes toward, or worship of any supreme being. Therefore, a pursuit of religion is an objective study of the existence of different religions of the world.

In the second sense, religion refers to the way a person expresses his beliefs. As such, the Bible speaks of true religion (James 1:27) and false religion (James 1:26). When a person is conscientious in his worship of God, the adjective “religious” is used. When the noun *religion* is used, we are discussing the end product of one’s devotion. Therefore, a study of religion to a certain person is an inquiry that makes this person more devoted so he can receive the blessing he perceives to be available in his religion.

A third use of religion is synonymous with Christianity. This use indicates that a person has a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ and is therefore religious, and that the only true religion is Christianity. Therefore, a study of religion is the broad inquiry into the Scriptures and reason leading to faith.

But Christianity is different from religion. Because there are so many false religions in the world, we do not usually refer to Christianity as a religion. If we did, it would place Christ on a par with the many alleged deities. If this were true, it might allow a person a choice between religions. But Christianity is not a religion with similar types of practices and beliefs that characterize false religions. Christian beliefs and practices are empowered with life. Since Jesus Christ is the only way to God (John 14:6), Christianity is Jesus Christ. At the center of every Christian’s belief and practice is a person, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ makes Christianity unique and alive. Jesus Christ makes Christianity more than a religion.

After we embrace the dynamic life of Christianity, we then strive to understand the forces that work in our lives. We identify these principles, categorize them, see how they fit into a consistent pattern and how they relate to life. This is the role of theologizing. Hence, both religion and Christianity use theology in arriving at their beliefs, but Christian theology evolves out of an experience that is based on God’s Word, and that is successfully reinforced by its correspondence to the realities of this world.

## II. THE TASK OF THEOLOGIZING

Before we begin the task of formulating a theology, we must recognize the existence of at least two conditions. First, we must be aware of the presuppositions that are in our minds before we examine the first aspect of theology. Second, we must be aware of the method or principles by which we do the work of theology.

First, let us examine our presuppositions. A presupposition is a conclusion that is not arrived at on the basis of any reason, experience or demonstrated proof. In reality, a presupposition is a "self-evident truth." By this we mean that our presuppositions do not have a chronological beginning, but they are axiomatically accepted without verification. However, this does not mean that we as theologians, or others who are not Christians, should accept our presuppositions simply because we "feel" them or know they are true. A presupposition, if it is true, will and must be verified by the test of consistency, correspondence and scientific demonstration in that it is repeatable and reliable.

We accept the following presuppositions: (1) that there is a God and that He has revealed Himself, (2) that there are laws that are self-evident, (3) that man has the ability to know things to the degree to which he directly observes them, (4) that truth does not contradict itself, but is consistent and corresponds to reality, and (5) that the mind accepts that which is logical and rejects that which is illogical.

As a presuppositionalist, one must accept that there is a God who has revealed Himself in the Bible, and that God has used human words in His self-revelation by which He wants man to know Him. Further, we must believe that it is possible to have a knowledge of God that is not contradictory with the actual existence of God, but corresponds to the metaphysical world and to the world of reality.

The second task before us is to understand the method we will use in formulating our theology. Inasmuch as our procedure will determine the final theological product, our theologizing must be correct if our theology is to be accurate.

The terms *systematic* and *theology* are interrelated, so that one cannot think of theology without thinking in a systematic way. Our thinking (method) must consider all relevant data (content). The word *theology* could be used without the descriptive word *systematic* because theology has come to imply a system. But because of common usage, the combined phrase "systematic theology" is used and inferred.

According to Thiessen, "The human intellect is not content with a mere accumulation of facts: it invariably seeks for a unification and systematization of its knowledge."<sup>6</sup> This is one of the prime reasons for the development of systematic theology.

*Systematic Theology* takes the material furnished by Biblical and Historical Theology, and with this material seeks to build up into an organic and consistent whole all our knowledge of God and of the relations between God and the

universe, whether this knowledge be originally derived from nature or from the Scriptures.<sup>7</sup>

The following definition of theologizing takes into consideration the content (natural and supernatural revelation), the method (rational, scientific, faith) the person (spiritually and mentally perceptive) and the tools (words, communication, defense, etc.).

Theologizing is the process whereby a person who has both experienced salvation and has grown in spiritual maturity, searches out all truth concerning God and His work, in both supernatural and natural revelation, using the rational process of inquiry, the resources of faith, and the scientific method of demonstrating, with a purpose of organizing the results of his study into a complete, comprehensive, and consistent expression that can be communicated, defended and admired.

Theologizing implies five steps for the student if he is to develop a comprehensive and adequate view of God and His world. These steps apply to every aspect of one's theology and to theology as a whole.

A. COLLECTING. The gathering of data is necessarily the first step to preparing one's theology. Theology demands the collection of all facts, not just the biblical facts. This means we must go outside of special revelation to that truth which God has revealed in natural or general revelation. Truth is that which is consistent with itself and corresponds to reality. There is truth in mathematics, nature and logic. To gain the most comprehensive understanding of God and His works, no source can be overlooked. Many of the false theologies stem from the neglect of this first premise—they have ignored or rejected some truth. Hence, these theologies are flawed.

B. SCIENTIFICALLY ARRANGING AND COMPARING. The next step is the scientific arrangement or integration of all the gathered facts into a coherent whole. The end product is a complete, comprehensive and consistent explanation of the topic under consideration. This is called a *systematic* way of thinking about truth. No doctrine is exhaustively treated by any biblical writer in a single verse. The theologian must find all the facts (or verses) that contain a fragment of the truth and fit them into a coherent pattern. Because truth will not contradict itself, we know we have arrived at an acceptable system when all our facts are consistently interrelated. Before adopting and teaching any theory as fact, we must apply certain tests.

1. *The test of consistency.* First ask, "Is the system consistent?" But consistency is not enough to guarantee that a system is true. Although truth is consistent with itself, it

is possible for a system to be internally consistent yet not be true. To be true it must be consistent, but it may be consistent and still not be true.

2. *The test of correspondence.* The second question is “Does it correspond to reality or life?” A system of theology may be a consistent doctrinal system, but when the second test of correspondence is applied, its theory may not correspond with truth found in natural revelation. Christianity is not proved by pragmatism, but once embraced, it will reaffirm its credibility in the application of its message to the lives of its recipients. If Christianity is true, then its principles will work within the parameters of their intended objectives.

3. *The test of priority of data.* The third step in constructing a systematic theology is to discriminate between what is essential and what is irrelevant. The important data will become foremost in our theology, and that which is less important will fall to the rear of our thinking. Many times that which appears to be contradictory is usually irrelevant to the main understanding of a doctrine. This does not mean that truth is contradictory, but it does sometimes appear that way to man in his sinful, limited, understanding and interpretation of life. By way of illustration, if we are going to do a systematic study of Francis Bacon, his books, letters and diaries are important to interpret his influence on the thoughts of men. But it is not as essential to know the color of his hair, nor his eating habits.

4. *The test of cohesiveness.* The fourth major concern of the theologian is to determine the cohesive nature of the data. It is said that theology has a firm center, but no hard-and-fast circumference which ultimately influences every area of life. The center of Christianity rests in the historical and supernatural revelation of Jesus Christ who lived, died and was buried in a tomb outside of Jerusalem. He arose again from the dead and His present life is the basis of Christianity for all who believe in Him. Jesus Christ is so uniquely revelatory of and related to the living God that He is the foundation of one’s faith. The controlling test of all data is its relationship to Christ.

5. *The test of thoroughness.* The fifth concern of the theologian is a rigorous examination of any and all questions related to the topic. This is more than an examination of all data. It is an attempt to answer all inquiries regarding a system of belief. To ignore or omit any question regarding any subject matter is to have a theology that is not complete and comprehensive. Finally, a word has to be said about the areas of philosophy, sociology, logic, ethics, history, psychology, and other areas of concern which may seem to have little to do with theology, but each of which deals with matters relevant to one or more aspects of the total theological task. The person who raises the question “What is theology?” must be willing to be a student of all these areas. Because of this comprehensive, yet thorough overview, theology is called the Queen of the Sciences.

C. EXHIBITING. While the Bible is supernatural in origin, it was originally given to people in cultures far different from ours today. Every group in every age must have the gospel interpreted to their culture so that it is meaningful to them. The theologian must present his theological system in a comprehensive and understandable form. This is imperative for the fulfillment of the Great Commission, “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19).

D. DEFENDING. The final responsibility of the theologian is the defense of the theory or laws of his system. When the theologian first brings all his facts into a system, it is a theory that has not been tested or proven. However, after it has been verified by the test of truth, then his theories become accepted principles, an expression in accord with eternal law. These conclusions must be displayed to the world for all to see. Then, after his findings are publicized, he must defend them. Of course, if his interpretation of theology is based upon a correct understanding of Scripture, supported with rational thinking to demonstrate its consistency, and reaffirmed by repeatable and workable application in life, the task of defense is somewhat diminished. Martin Luther was allegedly asked if he would defend the Bible, he supposedly responded, “Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion.”<sup>8</sup>

### III. EXPRESSIONS OF THEOLOGY

Depending upon one’s starting point (presuppositions) and self-imposed limitations (method), theology will have varied expressions. It is possible in some schools of thought to study theology without ever making a close examination of the biblical material relating to a particular doctrine. In contrast, another extreme position might consider a biblical doctrine without considering the contributions of the historic creeds of Christendom.

A. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY. Biblical Theology not only involves a study of Bible content, but also an examination of the dynamics involved in forming the Bible. Biblical Theology involves a study of (1) the languages in which the Bible was written, (2) textual criticism to determine the best biblical text, (3) literary criticism to determine its date, authorship, matter of composition, historical and sociological background by which the Bible is interpreted, (4) the problems of canon (the makeup of the Bible), and (5) the principles of exegesis by which the Bible is to be interpreted.

Biblical Theology systematically examines one area of revelation limiting its concern to a writer or a period of time with a purpose of gathering, examining, classifying and placing the results into a correlated whole so that the reader may understand the purpose, motives, and contribution of the specific biblical author.

Various writers define Biblical Theology differently. Thiessen calls it “exegetical theology,” noting, “EXEGETICAL THEOLOGY occupies itself directly with the study of the Sacred Text and such related subjects as help in the restoration, orientation,



illustration and interpretation of that text.”<sup>9</sup> Vos also recognizes a field of exegetical theology but notes, “Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”<sup>10</sup> Fitzwater calls biblical theology “the historical exhibition of the redemptive purpose of God as progressively unfolded in the canonical Scriptures.”<sup>11</sup> Strong’s functional definition suggests,

*Biblical Theology* aims to arrange and classify the facts of revelation, confining itself to the Scriptures for its material, and treating of doctrine only so far as it was developed at the close of the apostolic age.<sup>12</sup>

**B. HISTORICAL THEOLOGY.** Our Christian faith is organically linked to the New Testament by Christians who have lived before us. Church history is a study of the continuing influence of Christianity, so Historical Theology is a study of man’s expression of his faith by each generation in different sociological and ecclesiastical settings. Church history is more than the accumulation of facts, it is an understanding of missionary outreach, the form of worship, the nature of the church in all of its settings, the history of doctrine and the formulation of creeds in every age.

Historical Theology is the study of the expression of theology in each age with an examination of its expressed aim, emphasis, omissions and forces that change its expression from generation to generation since the closing of the canon.

Concerning Historical Theology, Thiessen notes, “It deals with the origin, development, and spread of the true religion, and also with its doctrines, organizations and practices.”<sup>13</sup> The emphasis of Historical Theology is normally focused on the developments of Christian doctrine after the closing of the canon.

**C. DOGMATIC THEOLOGY.** Dogmatic Theology is a study of the beliefs held by other groups throughout history. Some say Dogmatic Theology is the communication of one’s dogma, while others say that it is technically the ecumenical study of what others have believed. The first purpose of Dogmatic Theology is to help the student appreciate the problems and interpretations of other

Dogmatic Theology is the study of varied beliefs and creeds of the different religious sects and orders throughout church history with a view of producing a deeper understanding of Christianity in other generations and cultures and producing a deeper understanding of one’s unique theology.

theologies, which become his private dogma. This involves analyzing, interpreting and communicating a creed or doctrinal statement.

Strong calls Dogmatic Theology “the systematizing of the doctrines as expressed in the symbols of the church, together with the grounding of these in the Scriptures, and the exhibition, so far as may be, of their rational necessity.”<sup>14</sup> Phillip Schaff’s *The Creeds of Christendom*<sup>15</sup> is normally considered a standard work for the student of Dogmatic Theology. A study of the historic creeds of Christianity will help the contemporary theological student avoid many common heretical tendencies. Often the importance of a doctrine is only fully understood when viewed in the context of the battle which led to its formulation.

D. PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY. We do not arrive at our theology through philosophy but we make use of some philosophical or logical principles in arriving at theology. When a theologian articulates his Christian faith, he is making a clear statement of his understanding of God and the created universe. Hence, the theologian must use the scientific method of inquiry to arrive at his theology, and he must use linguistic symbols to communicate the realities of God and his world. Philosophical studies raise questions which cannot be ignored. These are questions regarding the validity of Christianity and its truth-claims. The fact that Christianity is doubted by non-Christians on both scientific and philosophical grounds is a problem. Hence, Philosophical Theology evolves into apologetics. The word *apologetics* does not mean “to regret,” but “to give an answer” to those who question Christianity. At one time, Philosophical Theology was called “Natural Theology.”

Philosophical Theology is the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting and defending of all data including logic, experience, reason, and facts from the natural world.

E. CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY. Contemporary Theology analyzes current thinking regarding Christianity. Inasmuch as Christianity must always be expressed in contemporary terms, the validity or non-validity of each person’s expression of Christianity must be examined and verified. This would involve tracing modern beliefs such as neo-orthodoxy, neo-liberalism, post-modernism, process theology, liberation theology, feminist theology and open theism.

Contemporary Theology is a study of the men, movements, institutions, and trends found in the current theological world.

F. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY. Systematic Theology is an effort to draw truth from any and every source concerning God and His universe and to express this truth simply in a

comprehensive and complete system. In this regard, an understanding of the above-mentioned expressions of theology are foundational to the preparation of one's personal systematic theology.

Systematic Theology may be defined as the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works.<sup>16</sup>

G. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY. The last and ultimate expression is Practical Theology. Practical Theology usually falls in the realm of how man worships God and how the work of God is carried out in the world. Too often, Practical Theology has been disassociated from Systematic Theology. When this happens, Practical Theology has appealed to pragmatism or contemporary educational methods. In fact, Practical Theology should be based upon theological principles. A theology that is in agreement with Scripture will successfully work in any culture or age.

In the broad field of theology, there are courses within the realm of all of these specializations. Just as every branch of learning has become more and more the object of specialized attention, so a study of Systematic Theology in our contemporary society has become sharper in its understanding and specialization.

Most theologians recognize the importance of integrating their philosophy of ministry with their theology. Strong suggests that Practical Theology “is the system of truth considered as a means of renewing and sanctifying men, or, in other words, theology in its publication and enforcement.”<sup>17</sup> To understand why a pastor leads a church the way he does, you must understand his ecclesiology. Most Christian Education professors in conservative seminaries will begin a course by discussing the biblical and theological foundation of their subject. The first lecture of a course in elementary education may be on what the Bible has to say about the education of children.

Thiessen suggests the ideal that,

Practical Theology treats the application of theology in the regeneration, sanctification, edification, education and service of men. It seeks to apply to practical life the things contributed by the other three departments of theology.<sup>18</sup>

H. THE DIVISIONS OF THEOLOGY. Systematic Theology discusses the entire coverage of God and His Word. But it is divided into several particular areas, each one centered around a section of theology.

1. Theology begins with PROLEGOMENA, which is its introduction. *Pro* means “to go before” and *lego* means “to say or speak.”

2. The theology of the SCRIPTURES is called BIBLIOLOGY. Bibliology comes from *biblion* (book or Bible) and *logos*, (a word).
3. The theology of GOD is referred to as THEOLOGY PROPER. Theology comes from *theos*, which means "God," and *logos*.
4. The theology of JESUS CHRIST is called CHRISTOLOGY. Christology comes from *Christos* (Christ) and *logos*.
5. The theology of the HOLY SPIRIT is called PNEUMATOLOGY. Pneumatology comes from *pneuma* (Spirit) and *logos*.
6. The theology of MAN is called ANTHROPOLOGY. Anthropology is derived from *anthropos* (man) and *logos*.
7. The theology of SIN is called HAMARTIOLOGY. Hamartiology comes from *Hamartia*, which means "sin," and *logos*.
8. The theology of SALVATION is called SOTERIOLOGY. Soteriology comes from *soteria* (salvation) and *logos*.
9. The theology of ANGELS (including Satan and demons) is called ANGELOLOGY. Angelology comes from *angelos* (angel) and *logos*.
10. The theology of the CHURCH is called ECCLESIOLOGY. Ecclesiology comes from *ecclesia* (church) and *logos*.
11. The theology of LAST THINGS is called ESCHATOLOGY. Eschatology comes from *eschatos* (last) and *logos*.

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#### **IV. THE NECESSITY OF THEOLOGY**

The possibility of theology itself is often cited as reason enough for the study of Systematic Theology. Thiessen identifies two concepts, the revelation of God and the endowments of man.<sup>19</sup> These are also enunciated by Strong, but a third is also given, "the existence of a God who has relations to the universe."<sup>20</sup> In all, there are at least five good reasons that demand the preparation of a systematized theology.

A. THE ORGANIZING INSTINCT OF MAN. It is natural for man to seek order. Man was created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26, 27), who is described as a God who sets all things in order (Deut. 1:8; Gen. 9:13). The Bible was not written as a theoretical book. Had the Bible been written as such, the initiative to understand God would have probably been taken from man.

The Bible is belief and life-oriented. God tests us in all areas of our life to determine how close we come to the truth. If theology were revealed in a doctrinal statement, men

would have known everything about God, hence eliminating the need to study and apply oneself to Scripture. Man would not have had an opportunity for spiritual growth. God intended rather that theology should be a lifelong pilgrimage.

Even though some deny the influence of reason in the formulation of theology, there are several ways by which the theologian should use his God-given ability to reason when he is constructing his theology. Some reject the use of reason because they feel that man is totally depraved and unregenerate. They feel it is wasted effort to try to tell man the truth. They say that it is like trying to teach an imbecile or a mentally retarded child geometry. Also, they say the mind of man, unaided by the Spirit of God, cannot comprehend God. However, the mind can use its reasoning ability to accept facts as true simply because they are not internally contradictory nor in contradiction to other known facts. Therefore, man's ability to reason is not just tolerated in theologizing. It is necessary. The Christian is morally and intellectually bound to accept as truth that which is rationally consistent. To go a step farther, the Christian is morally bound not to believe anything that is contradictory. The false gospel is rejected because it is a contradiction to the gospel (Gal. 1:8-9). If a Christian does not use reason to reject that which is contradictory and to accept that which is consistent, then he is saying that belief to him is nothing at all.

**B. CHARACTER OF UNBELIEF.** Few people today desire to understand doctrine. Humanism and rationalism are inherently anti-supernatural and anti-theistic. No one comes into the world with an inborn system of doctrine. The pastor cannot assume his people will be taught good doctrine from culture, schools or sermons from liberal churches. He cannot assume that people will naturally understand doctrine or will seek out doctrine. The nature of unbelief demands that doctrine be constructed and taught.

**C. CHARACTER OF SCRIPTURE.** The Bible is a revelation of God that demands a response. Our duty is to study, understand, and obey the revelation that God has given. Since the different biblical authors contributed different discussions of various topics, the Christian must organize all contributions to understand the complete message of the Holy Spirit concerning a particular doctrine.

**D. CHRISTIAN CHARACTER.** Through the precepts and principles taught in the Scriptures, Christian character is established and strengthened. These principles may be gleaned from proverbs, songs, epistles or biographies. Again, the Christian must organize his theology so as to establish the strongest Christian character. This means the Christian life should be grounded on the whole Word of God, not just one book of the Bible or just one topic of doctrine.

**E. CHRISTIAN SERVICE.** Doctrine is important to successful Christian service. There is a perfect will of God related to a perfect truth that comes when a Christian has perfect understanding, a consistent life, diligent and successful service, plus the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. When a stone is thrown into a pond, the waves are highest near the center. The further from the center, the smaller the waves. So the closer we come to the

center of God's truth and His will, the more God will bless us. While proper doctrine does not insure the blessing of God, it is a part of the total picture including yieldedness, hard work, prayer, and purity. The key to the blessing of God must include faith which is the only thing that is said to please God (Heb. 11:6). A person who expresses faith in God will grow as he learns more of the nature and attributes of God.

#### V. THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THEOLOGY

One must possess the proper methodology and tools to accurately arrange a systematic theology. The proper methodology was discussed earlier (see section II). The tools of theology are just as important.

A. INSPIRED REVELATION. The source of authority and the direction for our life and ministry is found in the Scriptures. They stand as the inerrant revelation of God to mankind. If God had not revealed Himself to mankind, theology would be impossible. "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). The Bible is the foundational tool of theology in addition to being its source.

With the rise of secular humanism there is decreased recognition of the authority of God. The tendency is to deny the existence of absolutes and oppose or reinterpret that which claims for itself final authority. As a result, one of the major theological debates of our day is the inerrancy of Scripture. Some are broadening their view of revelation in an attempt to develop a "universal theology." Therefore, they are prepared to use the Koran and the Bible to learn about God. These "theologians" need to be reminded of the declaration of Strong that "God himself, in the last analysis, must be the only source of knowledge with regard to his own being and relations."<sup>21</sup> In a somewhat similar line of thought, Thiessen wrote,

The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the scientist,—a body of unorganized or only partly organized facts. God has not seen fit to write the Bible in the form of a systematic theology; it remains for us, therefore, to gather together the scattered facts and to build them up into a logical system.<sup>22</sup>

B. FAITH. The total meaning of the Scripture cannot be understood by the natural man (1 Cor. 2:14). There must be a personal faith in God on the part of the theologian. We cannot disassociate one's personal faith from the content of the doctrine which is also called *The Faith*. But the word "faith" (*pistis*) is used in a number of ways. It usually means what people want it to mean. Therefore, we must ask ourselves four questions regarding faith.

First, is the present-day Christian faith in harmony with, and growing out of, that continuous faith of Christians found in the New Testament? If contemporary faith is different from New Testament faith, then we can question whether it truly is Christian faith. Many people have confused the essentials of faith by reading into Christianity their preconceived ideas about the content and expression of faith.

The second question deals with the predictability of faith. If faith is a reality and is available to all, then the method of acquiring it and expressing it must be predictable; is your concept of faith available to all individuals? That implies that the faith of one person will be similar to the faith of others, hence there is an objectivity to the existence of faith.

The third question deals with private faith. The study of theology is public, because anyone can examine it. However, personal faith is private and not directly amenable to public examination. When a person has experienced faith, it becomes nonverbal (experiential) in personal acquisition. The credibility of one's faith is evidenced by one's internal confidence and assurance based on outward objectivity. Hence, when we study theology and faith, we are delving into the area of axiology (that which is assumed to be true) and mysticism (that which is felt to be true). Is private faith based on objective faith?

The fourth question about faith involves its symbols and expressions. To understand faith, one must describe it as well as define it. This description is seen in church symbols, word symbols, and its influence upon one's life. Hence, are the symbols of one's faith meaningful? A Baptist theologian who gives meaning to water baptism, but has never been baptized or is unconcerned about getting others baptized, has raised a question about the credibility of his faith.

C. LANGUAGE. The third tool of the theologian is a working knowledge of biblical languages. The Bible was originally written in Greek (New Testament), Hebrew and Syriac (Old Testament). The serious theologian will desire to analyze the Scriptures so that he will not have to depend solely on the work of others, no matter how accurate their work. He will want to read the Bible in the language in which it was written and attempt to come to a better understanding of the culture of the people to whom the prophets or apostles wrote. I must add, however, that most good English translations accurately reflect the original languages, so that those without such original language skills may still understand the Bible.

D. HISTORY. A fourth tool of the theologian is an understanding of history, particularly the history of Christendom. In years past, most of the major doctrines of the faith have been argued, defended and even distorted. The theologian who learns from history will not only learn the best expressions of theology in the past, but he will also be aware of natural heretical tendencies and so avoid them.

In conclusion, some would support additional prerequisites to the study of theology with varying degrees of importance. Additional suggestions by Strong include a disciplined mind, an intuition, an acquaintance with the various sciences, a holy affection toward God and the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> However, even the most qualified and capable theologian must face certain limitations to his study.

## VI. THE LIMITATIONS OF THEOLOGY

Perhaps the most discouraging reality the theologian must confront is the impossibility of ever arriving at a



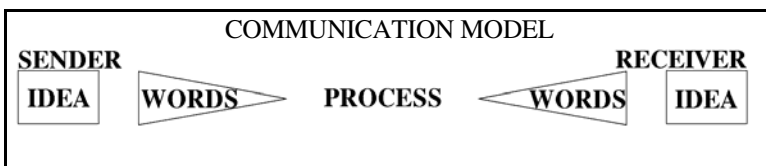
completely comprehensive and exact theology. Certain things exist beyond his control so his theology will always be limited. In other ways, the theologian himself may be the source of limitations on his theology. Here are some areas that tend to limit man's fuller knowledge of God.

A. HUMAN UNDERSTANDING. Isaiah correctly observed, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). Whatever else may be true of man and his intellectual ability, it must be acknowledged that he knows less than God. God, who is infinite, cannot be fully comprehended by finite minds.

Because man does not know everything about God, about life, about science, or about the explorations in historical theology, he cannot have perfect understanding in theology. Not only is man's source of knowledge limited, but his reasoning processes are limited. Therefore, even when he has done his best, his theology will be limited.

B. LANGUAGE.<sup>24</sup> God has used words to communicate his revelation to mankind and thus the limitations of language will limit our understanding of God. Human words are symbols, only partially able to communicate ideas. While they are useful in most situations, they fall short of perfection. Someone identified this problem by saying, "I know what I think I heard, but I am not sure it is what you think you said."

Because words are used to represent only ideas, the idea of an infinite God is limited



by the use of finite words. Therefore, even with the best of words, dictionaries and applications of language, we cannot fully or accurately communicate God, nor can we ever completely understand God. This is not saying God cannot be known, for all we need to know about God has been communicated and is available to us in the Bible. All that a person needs to obtain salvation and have a meaningful life can be understood and applied by any normal person.

C. IGNORANCE OF SCRIPTURE. The Psalmist prayed the prayer of the theologian. "Open thou mine eyes that I may behold . . ." (Psa. 119:18). The best interpretation of a verse of the Bible is learned only as we understand the context of the whole. The fact that we do not know everything in the Scriptures prevents us from a fuller understanding. This produces somewhat of a limitation in our theology. As our understanding of the Bible increases, this limitation will diminish, but it may never be totally eliminated.

D. THE SILENCE OF GOD. Because Christians recognize the application of biblical revelation to every area of life, God has some secrets He has sovereignly chosen not to reveal (Deut. 29:29). This silence is evident in Scripture when God instructs writers not to write (i.e., Rev. 10:4). This serves as a further limitation to our understanding of theology.

E. THE NATURE OF SCIENCE. Part of the tools that develop systematic theology are based on the sciences which are neither complete nor absolutely accurate. Science is based upon observations, and often theories and interpretations are based upon *limited* observations or limited facts. Preliminary observations in the past have been overturned by the discovery of previously unknown facts. Hence, our ability to perfectly understand God is limited by the imperfect state of our developing sciences. We do not know everything, nor is all our knowledge accurate.

F. SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS. Sin in our lives will hinder our ability to understand the Bible. There are several kinds of blindness discussed in Scripture. Israel experiences a partial blindness as seen in their rejection of their Messiah (Rom. 11:25), but Gentiles have also been blinded by the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:3-6). Beyond this, the Christian will experience some blindness by allowing sin in his life. This spiritual inability to completely perceive God's pattern is a further limitation of systematic theology.

## VII. TEACHING AND PREACHING THEOLOGY<sup>25</sup>

When most people think of preaching or teaching theology, they tend to think in terms of lectures on irrelevant interpretations of obscure texts that have little to do with life. Actually, the preaching of the Word of God is still the greatest enticement to get people into the house of God. Phillips Brooks told students of his day,

The world has not heard its best preaching yet. If there is more of God's truth for men to know, and if it is possible for the men who utter it to become more pure and godly, then, with both of its elements more complete than they have ever been before, preaching must some day be a completer power.<sup>26</sup>

This type of doctrinal preaching is somewhat different from what most people consider when they think of theology. John Booth wisely noted that "doctrinal preaching is the arranging and setting forth of truth."<sup>27</sup> A more contemporary writer states, "*Doctrinal preaching* is preaching which aims at instructing the people methodically in the truths of the gospel."<sup>28</sup>

In contemporary Christianity very little emphasis is placed upon teaching theology outside the Christian college or seminary classroom. Little theology is communicated in the contemporary pulpit. This is in contrast to the obvious importance of teaching doctrine that is seen in God's working through historic revivals.

In the past every evangelistic movement blessed of God has come largely through preaching doctrine. Evangelism has flourished, or languished, according to the amount and the fervor of such pulpit work.<sup>29</sup>

Because teaching doctrine is important, there are certain principles the pastor should consider as he prepares to teach or preach.

A. IMPORTANCE. Every pastor should recognize the importance of preaching doctrine. George Pepper in his Yale lectures on preaching, defined preaching as “the public use of speech with intent to reveal God to man.”<sup>30</sup> Phillips Brooks called it “the communication of truth by man to men.”<sup>31</sup> In one sense, then, doctrine determines the content of all preaching. As such, it also provides the aims and strategy of preaching. Powerful preaching is the preaching of doctrine. Brooks told the ministerial students at Yale,

The truth is, no preaching ever had any strong power that was not the preaching of doctrine. The preachers that have moved and held men have always preached doctrine. No exhortation to a good life that does not put behind it some truth as deep as eternity can seize and hold the conscience. Preach doctrine, preach all the doctrine that you know, and learn forever more and more; but preach it always, not that men may believe it, but that men may be saved by believing it.<sup>32</sup>

B. ALLEGIANCE. The pastor who would teach his people a biblical theology must be certain of his loyalties. This may involve surrendering any denominational allegiance to the Lord. It is more important to teach what the Bible says than to teach Presbyterian or Baptist doctrine. Do not treat doctrines as sectarian issues. If the distinctives of your group are biblical, then teach them the Bible. If they are not, change them.

C. RELEVANCE. Too many pastors and teachers spend much of their time answering unimportant questions. We should study to answer critical questions. Powerful preaching does not merely describe doctrine; it applies religious faith to a specific human concern, and helps to bring out physical, mental, and spiritual health.<sup>33</sup>

Tozer’s dissatisfaction with the biblical illiteracy in his day is evident in the following statement from one of his editorials in a denominational paper.

One marked difference between the faith of our fathers as conceived by the fathers and the same faith as understood and lived by their children is that the fathers were concerned with the root of the matter, while their present-day descendants seem concerned only with fruit.<sup>34</sup>

In the generation since his death, if there has been a change in this condition, it has been for the worse. Gordon Lewis acknowledges,

*Many Christians never leave the first principles of the gospel. Still spiritual infants, they must be bottle-fed the same formula. When confronted at the door by a representative of another sect, they are helpless to give a reason for the hope that is in them. On the basis of their faith they are speechless; yet on the reasons for their choice of a house or a car they can discourse at length. This sinful negligence by even one member of the church causes the whole body to suffer [italics in original].*<sup>35</sup>

Often I remind my students when they study theology, be careful not to sharpen your pencil too sharp. When the pencil is too sharp, the point will break. So it is when we become so precise in our theology as to seemingly forget the limitations of this study, and begin to speak authoritatively out of our ignorance. It is at that moment we break the pencil and render it useless.

We must study theology. We must organize revelation in a systematic manner. We must seek to gather material to compile the fullest and most accurate and precise answer possible in the revelation of God. But we must also never forget, “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God” (Deut. 29:29).

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#### ENDNOTES

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1. This story about Moody has been quoted in classes of theology, but not documented. The author has heard it several places and has repeated it here.
  2. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1970), 1.
  3. P. B. Fitzwater, *Christian Theology: A Systematic Presentation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 19.
  4. Andrew Watterson Blackwood, *Doctrinal Preaching for Today: Case Studies of Bible Teachings* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 115.
  5. Thomas Rees, “Dogma,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 2:868.
  6. Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 27.
  7. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 41.
  8. Phillip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3 Volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).\*
  9. Thiessen, *Lectures in Theology*, 46.
  10. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 13.
  11. Fitzwater, *Christian Theology*, 20-21.

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12. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 41.
  13. Thiessen, *Lectures in Theology*, 46.
  14. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 41.
  15. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*.\*
  16. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 1:6.
  17. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 42.
  18. Thiessen, *Lectures in Theology*, 46.
  19. *Ibid.*, 31.
  20. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 2.
  21. *Ibid.*, 25.
  22. Thiessen, *Lectures in Theology*, 28.
  23. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 38-40.
  24. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (New York:: Bantam Books, 1967).\* The "COMMUNICATION MODEL" diagram is based upon a model by his design.
  25. For a plan by which a pastor can teach a summary of biblical doctrine over the course of a year in his church, see Elmer L. Towns, *What the Faith Is All About* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1983).
  26. Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 33.
  27. John Nicholls Booth, *The Quest for Preaching Power* (New York: MacMillan, 1943), 18.
  28. Lloyd M. Perry, *Biblical Preaching for Today's World* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), 126-27.
  29. Blackwood, *Doctrinal Preaching*, 51.
  30. Cited by Blackwood, *Doctrinal Preaching*, 17.
  31. Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching*, 5.
  32. *Ibid.*, 129.
  33. Booth, *Preaching Power*, 23.
  34. A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1955), 7.
  35. Gordon R. Lewis, *Decide for Yourself: A Theological Workbook* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 9-10.

\* Denotes page number(s) could not be verified.