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## Why Theology?

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# WHY THEOLOGY?

BY RON HIGHFIELD

Theology is one of those words restorationists find difficult to pronounce without raising an eyebrow. A stepchild even now, it was grudgingly admitted to our college curricula less than thirty years ago—and then only under pseudonyms. The Restoration movement's suspicion of theology is not of recent origin; it was present at the beginning. Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and others understood humanly contrived systems of theology to be responsible for many of the ills that plague the body of Christ. Following the Restoration pioneers, Churches of Christ and Christian Churches maintained the original suspicion of theology into the twentieth century.

In the early and mid-twentieth century, Churches of Christ prized knowledge of the English Bible far above so-called "theological" knowledge. Our resistance to systematic theology, as the academic subject is called, did not abate significantly in the 50s, 60s, or 70s. Even as our desire for advanced study in divinity schools and university graduate schools increased, our focus on the study of the Bible remained constant. Though scholars gradually replaced the debate-thesis tradition of interpretation with the historical-critical tradition, the assumption that Bible knowledge is all you need remained fundamental to our understanding of theological education.

I join our Restoration fathers and mothers unreservedly in acknowledging the Bible as the sole norm

of all things Christian. I believe additionally, however, that this commitment does not rule out the study and practice of systematic theology. In what follows, I hope to show you that thinking theologically is a natural outgrowth of reading the Bible and living out our faith as Christians.

## Why Study at All?

Perhaps the best way to get at the question of whether ministers and other Christians ought to study systematic theology is to ask a more fundamental question: Why study the faith at all? Can we justify any method of studying the faith? If so, why not study it in the way systematic theology does?

### *A Simple Believer's Objection*

"Why study the faith at all? Why subject the faith to academic analysis? Isn't the simple gospel story sufficient? Isn't God available to all the faithful?" the simple believer may ask. Offended by our learned arrogance, the person in the pew may lash out: "You seem to imply that you can know God only through some special academic study and that the rest of us are dependent on you for theological crumbs that fall from your table. Well, let me tell you, I've read the Bible all my life—I've tried to live by it, too!—and I'm not going to be told that I can't understand it apart from the latest word from you academics. No sir, you can keep your theological learn-



ing. I'll just take the simple, clear words of scripture. That'll be enough for me!"

Those of us who prize the academic study of the faith need to listen carefully to this sincere objection. Before we reject it out of hand or make a hasty reply, we need to face the truth it contains. Our response will be persuasive only if we can do equal or greater justice to its truth while explaining and avoiding its errors.

### Strengths

There is much truth in this simple objection. First, the objector has seized upon a fundamental premise of Christian theology: God can be known only through God. You cannot know God unless God reveals himself to you. God is not an object, like a tree, that you can examine with the methods of science apart from its cooperation. God is a person, a subject. Since you cannot know me as a person apart from my self-revelation, how much less can you know God apart from God's self-revelation!

If we study the faith academically because we hope to discover something about God and his will through our own wisdom, apart from his gracious self-revelation, we deserve all the scorn heaped upon us by the simple faithful. If God wants to be known by the ordinary and unlearned, you can be sure that he will be known. If God wants to withhold knowledge of himself from us students, professors, and learned scholars, none of our sophisticated methods can wrest it from him! I have known saintly old grandmothers and grandfathers who wouldn't know Karl Barth from Augustine of Hippo, but for them the God of the Bible is as real as the noonday sun. And I have known of learned New Testament scholars who are atheists. So, whatever function we assign to the academic study of the faith, we must not violate the principle that God can be known only through God.

There is a second truth embedded within the objection to academic study, and it's related to the first: God alone chooses the ministry for his church. Only God can qualify teachers and pastors for his people. No institution of higher education can certify, and no academic degree can guarantee, that you have a right to speak in God's name. Earning an M.Div. or a Ph.D. neither earns you the right nor gives you the

ability to speak God's word to his church. Only God can do that.

Maybe simple believers know us better than we know ourselves at this point. Perhaps deep down we really do think, because we studied Greek and Hebrew, are aware of the Synoptic problem, and have heard of Marcion, Thomas Aquinas, Frederick Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, and a host of others, that we have an automatic mandate as respected teachers of the church. Don't we enjoy a bit too much knowing things that others don't know? Perhaps we do consider ourselves spiritually superior to others who can't beat us at theological trivial pursuit.

If this is why you value the academic study of the faith, you'd better rethink it. Nothing you learn at an academic center will, apart from God's grace, qualify you to be a minister. Nothing you discover there will elevate you above your fellow Christians and give you a right to instruct them in the ways of God.

### Weaknesses

Now, before you drop out of school or throw away your books, let's examine the weaknesses of this protest. First, although it attempts to honor the principle that God is known only through God, it errs in the individualistic twist it gives this truth; it originates in a weak doctrine of the church. God is known only through God—yes, but God has revealed himself historically in Israel and in Jesus Christ. We today depend on our brothers and sisters the prophets and apostles, who experienced firsthand the historic revelation of God. They tell us what they saw and heard. We depend, moreover, on those throughout history that preserved the scriptures for us today.

It's no shame to depend on others. It's not a weakness. That's the way God made the church. We all depend on each other. Our dependence on the church for our knowledge of God no more contradicts our dependence on God than our dependence on the farmer voids our prayer of thanks at the table.

For all the truth on the side of the simple believer's objections to academic theology, there is a certain naiveté about it. The individual who thinks he reads his Bible for himself, all on his own, must not be aware of how much he depends on others.



## Christians, even the most uneducated, make some effort to fit the various statements of scripture into a coherent pattern.

You need not know how to read to understand the Bible, but someone does. You certainly don't need to understand Hebrew and Greek to read the Bible with understanding, but someone had to learn it. The way you read the Bible and what you expect to get from it have been shaped by the whole history of the church. You bring a ready-made set of questions, beliefs, and expectations to your reading that you received from teachers, sermons, songs, prayers, and debates. We always interpret the Bible within a theological tradition.

In the second place, the simple believer doesn't act consistently with his objection. When you read scripture, perhaps over and over, that is study. The aim of that study is to understand the Bible. If you use the maps in the back of your Bible to look up the location of Bethany or Rome, if you use a Bible dictionary to get an idea of what an ancient aqueduct or olive press looked like, you are benefiting from the work of scholars. Christians, even the most uneducated, make some effort to fit the various statements of scripture into a coherent pattern. We intuitively believe that truth must be coherent. Our minds automatically work to harmonize and systematize the various claims found within scripture. They also work to harmonize the claims of scripture with other things we consider to be true. Now, if it's legitimate to do this in our homes, it's legitimate to do it in a school.

### Why Not Study Just the Bible?

Perhaps you're thinking at this point, "Fine . . . okay . . . you've convinced me of the legitimacy of academic study of the faith, generally. But why study systematic theology? Why not study just the Bible? Why would we want to study human theological

opinions when we could be studying the inspired word of God?"

Now, this objection may be getting a little closer to what some of you think. So I want to tread carefully and do full justice to its truth. Certainly, the Bible is the unsurpassable norm of all teaching and moral action in the church. The Bible is the only authentic record of God's revelation to Israel and of his once-for-all-time revelation in Jesus Christ. The church has irreversibly received its authority over its doctrine and life. The study of the Bible therefore must be at the center of the church's efforts to keep its doctrine and life in line with God's revelation.

### *The Problem of Interpretation*

Our commitment to study scripture does not, however, solve the problem of interpretation. How shall we read and interpret scripture properly? Many scholars love to point out the diversity of viewpoints within the Bible. Rejecting all theological presuppositions about the Bible, they "discover" many mutually incompatible theologies within this "collection": Q theology, Markan theology, Pauline, Deuteropauline, Johannine theology, and so on. The symphonic unity of the Bible disappears into a multiplicity of cacophonous voices. The authority of the biblical message dissolves into the contradictions of ancient Near Eastern and Hellenistic religion.

But if you accept the Bible, along with the church, as a witness to the revelation of the one God, and if you embrace the faith of the church, you will "discover" much more unity within the Bible. The obvious differences between Matthew and John and between Paul and the Apocalypse will not discourage us from speaking of the one Christian faith and of the one biblical theology. The church, not the academy, teaches us how to read scripture correctly, that is, as Christians.

The unity or disunity of the biblical message, therefore, is not an empirical datum that appears to whoever analyzes the Bible objectively. The unity of the Bible makes sense theoretically and appears as a fact only under the guidance of the faith of the church. Likewise, the essential disharmony scholars think they find in the Bible is the product of their expectations, which are determined by humanistic presuppositions and political goals of the Enlight-



enment. There is no neutrality. You must begin with some faith hypothesis, be it humanist, Freudian, Marxist, feminist, or whatever. Christians stand with the church in this matter. We are partisans, with no apologies.

### *The Role of Theology*

Now, notice how we've described our situation. The church is under the norm of scripture, yet the church must use its grasp of the faith as a guide by which to interpret the Bible so that scripture's authentic voice may be heard in the church. We've drawn here a distinction between the Bible and the church's faith, but we've placed them in a holistic relationship in which neither one can stand alone. This distinction-in-relationship between the church's confession and the Bible is the key to the place of theology in the life of the church.

The church's understanding of the faith stands between the Bible and the world. The church must continually study the Bible to make sure the church's confession of faith harmonizes with the self-revelation of God recorded in scripture. It has no right to substitute another gospel. But the church must use its confession hypothetically, as a guide to biblical interpretation, even though faithfulness to the original revelation demands that the church not rule out modification of its confession on the basis of Bible study.

The church must also present its faithful message to the world in a way that exposes the falsehood of heretical distortions and challenges other religious and philosophical alternatives. It must, therefore, at times confess its faith in nonbiblical words, concepts, metaphors, and analogies that enable the person of a different age or culture to understand the original faith. Since the church proclaims its faith as the truth about God and the world, it works to summarize and explain its faith in a coherent pattern or story, believing that coherence is an important mark of truth.

Now we have all the essential elements of systematic theology. The systematic theologian attempts to write a coherent presentation of the church's faith that is faithful to the original self-revelation of God recorded in scripture. Though he gives due honor to the language used in the Bible and to tradition, the

systematic theologian makes every effort, as a teacher of the church and a missionary to the world, to explain the historic faith in a way that is comprehensible to contemporary people.

Because the church faces new challenges in every age, the systematic theologian brings to bear on every new issue a comprehensive knowledge and sense of the church's historic faith. In this way, the church attempts to offer the church the benefit of

**The systematic theologian makes every effort, as a teacher of the church and a missionary to the world, to explain the historic faith in a way that is comprehensible to contemporary people.**

her trained theological judgment on issues that cannot be settled merely by a scriptural quotation. Believing the Christian faith to be the truth about God, humanity, and the world, the systematic theologian will present the faith in a clear, logical, and comprehensive way, showing the coherence of the parts with the whole and the whole with all the parts.

### **How Do You Do Systematic Theology?**

You may now ask, "Yes, perhaps someone needs to engage in something like systematic theology, but I wouldn't know where to begin. How do you do it?"

### *Theology as a Craft*

You learn the craft of systematic theology the same way you learn other skills—by watching it be done, trying your hand at it, being criticized by a master, and then doing it all over again. From the time I was an undergraduate student through my master of theology studies, I knew little of theology as a craft. I read a bit—always without real under-



standing—I learned a few stereotypes, memorized some names to drop, picked up a few disjointed ideas to bandy about in conversation; but I didn't learn how to think theologically.

In a sense, my real theological education began when I left graduate school. Struggling with the real life-and-death theological issues in the church, I learned the importance of having sharp theological skills. I also realized how inadequate mine were. I began a regimen of reading biblical studies, theology, and philosophy in a desperate effort at self-education. I remember reading volume 1, part 1 of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* twice, without understanding a word of it either time. As I read, I had the impression of understanding the words and sentences, but I couldn't understand it as a whole. I couldn't break into Barth's thought and anticipate what he'd say next. But I didn't give up. I went on to volume 1, part 2. I began to understand. By the time I read volume 2, parts 1 and 2, I realized I now understood volume 1, part 1! I didn't need to reread it; it simply fell into place.

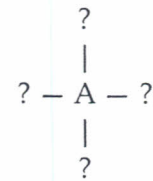
If you want to learn this skill, you must read theologians, not just for what they say on the surface. You must allow their words to bring you into contact with that unspoken reservoir of skills, beliefs, concerns, and judgments that makes that theologian a theologian. But you must be careful to whom you submit your mind. I was attracted to Karl Barth because of his profound sense of God's sovereignty and holiness and his firm commitment to trace out the logic of the biblical faith no matter what the intellectuals of the day might think.

I've made the point that I can't give you a theory or a cookbook method of systematic theology that will enable you to do theology. Nevertheless, I want to make a few theoretical observations.

### The Web of Theology

Studying systematic theology can help you see that statements about God cannot stand alone. You cannot affirm a theological statement's truth without knowing its place within a systematic web of concepts. Take the statement "God is good," for example. This affirmation is defined by its relationship to all other biblical statements about God and goodness. Without this context, it says nothing definite.

Who is God? What is good? We can illustrate it this way:



There is more to systematic theology than drawing out that which is logically implicit in biblical statements,

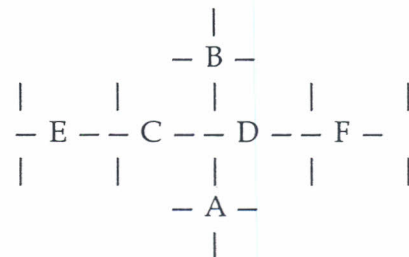
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If we did that with every biblical affirmation, we'd have thousands of hopeless contradictions.

We must, rather, connect and balance them in web relationships. For theological statements gain their precision and content only in their relationships with each other. We can model the web of theology this way:



Theology is not a system like geometry, which begins with a few basic axioms from which all the rest of the system is deduced. Its logic is not linear, but holistic. The parts of a Christian systematic theology cohere with one another like the notes of a symphony, with parts giving meaning to the whole and the whole giving meaning to the parts. I am told that Mozart could hear the whole composition in his head before he wrote down a single note. Just so with the work of the theologian: he must be granted a

vision of the whole faith at once and never lose sight of it, even in a single sentence.

### **The Reality of God**

But what's it all for? Theology, as the word is used today, means an academic discipline whose aim is to train professional ministers to serve the church. That's not what it meant before the Enlightenment, and especially not in the time of the church fathers. For them, theology meant "knowledge of God" and so was concerned with more than the limited goals of the academy. I hope we can bring this earlier meaning back into our universities, colleges, and our lives. I hope you will not separate your quest for academic qualifications from your quest to know the living God.

Let us not be satisfied with doctrine alone, with language about God. We need to realize that the ultimate purpose of doctrine is to point beyond itself to the transcendent reality of God. Doctrine leads, channels, and forms our relationship to God. It is not the end, but the means to the end of knowing God personally. So, in a sense, the truth of doctrine is its negation; its purpose is to be left behind. The purpose of learning doctrine is to forget it. The apostle said it best when he wrote, "Now we see but a poor reflection . . . ; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Cor 13:12 NIV).

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