

The School of Christian Theology

Lesson 1

Why and How Do We Do Theology?

Objective: To understand the nature, necessity, benefits, and possibility of doing theology, particularly systematic theology in the Reformed tradition.

Overview of the Class

Dates and Table of Contents

Resources

- The Bible (mostly going to be using the English Standard Version)
- The Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism, and Shorter Catechism
Online Version - www.opc.org/confessions.html
Print Versions - www.pcabookstore.com (Fortress Edition, Official Version)
- Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrine for Christian Disciples* (Zondervan, 2011)
- Website with Handouts and Videos: www.trinityboro.com/school-of-christian-theology

I. What Is Theology?

- θεος – *theos* – God
- λογος – *logos* – word, logic, study

Theology is the study of God, or words about God

But theology is not limited to saying things about God himself. We must also recognize and remember what Paul says in Romans 11:36, “[For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.](#)”

So, theology is the study of God *and all things that pertain to God.*

“Theology is the study of how to speak truly of God and of all things in relation to God... Theology means thinking about all things in relation to God.” – Kevin Vanhoozer (1957-Present), “A Letter to An Aspiring Theologian: How to Speak of God Truly”

“Theology is taught by God, teaches of God, and leads to God.” – Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), *Summa Theologica* 1.1.7

“Theology is the doctrine of living unto God through Christ” – Petrus van Mastricht (1630-1706), *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 1:8

“Love theology, of course: but love theology for no other reason than it is THEOLOGY—the knowledge of God—and because it is your meat and drink to know God, to know him truly, and as far as it is given to mortals, to know him whole.” – B.B. Warfield (1851-1921), “Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary”

II. The Common Areas (*Loci Communes*) of Theology

Traditional Topic Heading	What It Means	Things Included in the Topic
Prolegomena	Introductory Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Theology • Scripture
Theology Proper	Doctrine of God	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God’s Attributes • God’s Trinitarian Nature • God’s Eternal Decree • God’s Works of Creation and Providence
Anthropology	Doctrine of Mankind/Humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image of God • The Covenant of Works • The Fall/Sin • Freewill
Christology	Doctrine of Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Covenant of Grace • The Person of Christ (Incarnation) • The Work of Christ (Atonement/the Accomplishing of Salvation)
Soteriology	Doctrine of Salvation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union with Christ (the Application of Salvation/the Work of the Holy Spirit) • Election • Effectual Calling/Regeneration • Justification • Adoption • Sanctification • Perseverance to the End
Ecclesiology	Doctrine of the Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Nature of the Church • The Marks of the Church • The Attributes of the Church • Worship & Mission • Government & Discipline • Sacraments
Eschatology	Doctrine of Last Things	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death & the Intermediate State • Heaven & Hell • The Return of Christ • The Resurrection of the Dead • Final Judgment • Eternal Life

III. Is Theology Necessary?

“Can’t we just love Jesus and love our neighbor? Why don’t we just live the Christian life and stop with all this studying and thinking? Isn’t that what Jesus calls us to do anyway?”

Is it actually possible to “just live the Christian life” without “all this studying and thinking”? Can we love God without knowing who he is? What does it mean to love our neighbor? What do we do if we aren’t very good at loving our neighbor? Will we still love God if bad things happen to us? Are we actually loving Jesus if we think we should follow his teachings but not worship him?

Maybe a better way to ask the opening question is, “Is theology avoidable?” Is it possible to avoid theology? The answer is “No.” Everyone has answers to life’s ultimate questions:

- Who am I?
- Where did I come from?
- What is my purpose?
- What is wrong with the world?
- Is there anything beyond this world and this life?

*“Whether you realize it or not, you are a theologian. You come to a book like this with a working theology, an existing understanding of God. Whether you are an agnostic or a fundamentalist—or something in between—you have a working theology that shapes and informs the way you think and live.” – Michael Horton (1964-Present), *Pilgrim Theology*, 13*

*“I think any man who wants to think about God at all would want to have the clearest and most accurate ideas about him which are available... if you do not listen to theology that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you a lot of wrong ones – bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas.” C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), *Mere Christianity*, 155*

IV. Why Would I Do Theology?

- **Communion/Fellowship with God**

Psalm 111:2, Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.

Psalm 63:5-6, My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night.

John 17:3, And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

1 John 5:2, And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

- **Discipleship and Maturity**

Matthew 28:18-20, And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Ephesians 4:11-16, And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

- **Dealing with the Difficulties and Complexities of Life**

- How do you have hope in the midst of despair?
- How do you fight against temptations to sin?
- How do you interpret and combat the things you encounter in our culture?

John 9:1-2, As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

- **Teaching the Next Generation**

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-21, Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates... When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.' (cf. Ex. 12:26-27)

Psalm 78:1-7, Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.
He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments.

- **Evangelism & Apologetics**

1 Peter 3:14-16, But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

- **Proclaiming God's Word to One Another**

Colossians 3:15-16, And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Ephesians 4:15-16, Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

1 Thessalonians 5:14, And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

1 Thessalonians 5:11, Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

We don't only quote Scripture to one another, but we tell each other what the Scriptures mean—that is theology.

WSC Q. 37. *What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?*

A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

WSC Q. 38. *What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?*

A. At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

V. Is Theology Possible?

- Men at the elephant
- Theology is only possible because God has revealed himself

“Theology is the science which derives the knowledge of God ***from his revelation***, which studies and thinks into it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and then tries to describe it so that it ministers to his honor. And a theologian, a true theologian, is one who speaks out of God, through God, and does this always to the glorification of his name.” – Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), *The Wonderful Works of God*

- Archetypal vs. Ectypal theology

“Does this mean that we cannot know God at all? Are comparisons meaningless? Not at all, because God has revealed himself through everyday language. Like “baby talk,” God speaks in ways that we can understand. His communication is effective, though he infinitely transcends his own revelation. When he tells us that he is good, speaks of himself as a loving parent or king, and responds to our prayers, we can be confident that he is telling us the truth as far as we can know it—even though it is not the Truth as he knows it. God’s knowledge is archetypal (original), while ours is ectypal (a finite copy). God is not only infinitely transcendent, but freely immanent as well—that is, coming to us, getting involved in our lives. Because our God does not remain aloof in blissful

detachment but enters into our history by speaking his Word and then sending his incarnate Word to us for our redemption, we can know God truthfully as finite creatures.” – Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 33 (we will talk more about how he reveals himself next week)

VI. How Are We Going To Do Theology in This Class?

- a. The Branches of Theology
 - i. Exegetical Theology – looking closely at the words and syntax of a particular text to determine its meaning (this is usually what is most in focus for preaching)
 - ii. Biblical Theology – tracing the unfolding development of a doctrine or theme in Scripture (e.g., temple, prayer, holiness, exile, etc.)
 - iii. Systematic Theology – synthesizing what the whole Bible teaches about a particular doctrine
 - iv. Historical Theology – seeing what the church in history has understood Scripture to be teaching about a particular doctrine (e.g., canon, sacraments, God’s attributes, etc.)
 - v. Practical Theology – exploring the effect (i.e., “use”) a doctrine has on Christian piety and practice (e.g., how does our doctrine of the Trinity affect our understanding of prayer)
 - vi. Liturgical Theology – the meaning of what we do and say in our worship on the Lord’s Day (e.g., confession of sin, preaching, baptism, corporate prayer, etc.)
- b. Why systematic theology?¹
 - It gives attention to four things:
 - The **unity** of Scripture

 - The **full scope** of biblical teaching (i.e., “the whole counsel of God,” Acts 20:27)

¹ From Scott Swain, “Basics of Systematic Theology,” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/basics-systematic-theology>

“[Failure to attend to the whole counsel of God] leads to one-sidedness and error in theology and pathology in the Christian life.” – Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:617

“A half-truth masquerading as a whole truth becomes a complete untruth.” – J.I. Packer (1926-2020), Introduction to John Owen’s *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*

- The **proportions** of Scripture

- The **relationships between various doctrines**

VII. Where Are We Coming from in This Class?

We are confessionally Reformed/Presbyterian. We aren’t pretending to come to the Bible with a blank slate or with no prior understanding. We come with the voices of the church historic helping us to understand the voice of God in Scripture. (We will talk more about this in Lesson 16, “The Story of the Church.”)

We have some overlap with other traditions, especially before lines were drawn between them (e.g., Great Schism finalized in 1054 A.D., Reformation began in 1517 A.D., solidification of Anglicanism in 1662 A.D.). But we are intentionally coming to these topics with help from our tradition. For us, that is the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition—most clearly set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith, along with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (all written between 1646-1649).

Other Traditions:

- Catholic
- Orthodox
- Anglican
- Lutheran
- Baptist
- Pentecostal
- Methodist
- Non-denominational

“Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.” – G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), *Orthodoxy*

“Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of the homogenized tradition.” – Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006), Interview with U.S. News & World Report, July 26, 1989

“Theological dogma is always a combination of these two elements: divine authority and churchly confession.” – Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pg. 31

Suggested Further Reading on the Task of Theology

A Little Book for New Theologians: Why and How to Study Theology by Kelly Kapic

“Who Needs Systematic Theology When We Have the Bible?” by Michael Horton

Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine

by Kevin Vanhoozer

Readings for Next Class

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1

Westminster Larger Catechism 2-6

Westminster Shorter Catechism 2-3

Horton, 51-72 (and 13-50 if you haven’t already read that)

Additional Readings for Next Class

“The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy”

“The Inerrancy of Scripture” by Kevin Vanhoozer