

What Is Theology?

Week # 1: What Is Theology?

Scripture Focus

Various

Key Verses: Matthew 16:13-19; I Peter 3:15

Overview

This is the first lesson in a four-year curriculum series titled, “Theology Driven Ministry.” First Peter refers to all believers as royal priest; therefore it is required of all priests to not only know theology, but to also be ready to give a defense for the hope that is within them. This series seeks to accomplish both educating believers in the great wonders of God and equipping believers for the great work of ministry.

Since this lesson is the inaugural lesson in the series, several introductory matters are included in order to lay a solid foundation on which to build future lessons. Primarily, this lesson establishes a definition of theology as well as prepares students to engage their hearts and minds in the study of theology in order to be better equipped to serve God and share the Good News.

Theme

Answering the question, “What is Theology?” often results in volumes of books in which the end result is the same. Put simply, theology is the discussion of God. So as you prepare to teach TDM curriculum, you simply are preparing yourself to teach your students how to correctly talk about God.

Desired Learner Response

Your mission in this lesson is for your students to be able to accurately define theology as well as state why it is essential for them to be able to correctly talk about God.

Outline

- I. What is Theology?
 - a. More than a definitional statement
 - b. The critical components
- II. Why do we need to study Theology?
 - a. The health of the church
 - b. The hope of the community

Getting Started

Ask: When you hear the word Theology, what are some thoughts that come to mind?

Ask: How does a right view of God affect other areas in our lives?

Searching the Scriptures

The word “theology” originates from two Greek words: *theos* (God) and *logos* (word). Theology is words or conversations about God. Acquiring the ability to correctly speak about God should motivate believers to invest necessary time and energy into studying His Word.¹ The very fact that God has spoken compels believers to speak about Him in a manner that accurately reflects His revelation of Himself.

The first two points below are introductory in nature. First, we will address the definition of theology. It is imperative that your students grasp the intricacies of the definition in order to have a foundation on which all other lessons will stand. This definition is one which you should regularly refer to over the next several lessons, then periodically over the next four years. Second, we will answer the question that may be in the mind of your students, namely, why should we study theology? The simple answer is that we want to talk about God in a manner completely consistent with how He has already talked about Himself.

I. What Is Theology?

A. More than a Definition

Although your students may initially see this lesson as little more than a walk through Webster’s Dictionary, your constant attention to them honoring God will soon dispel that impression. Several guiding factors must be followed when constructing a definition of actions so central to our faith as our conversations about God.² There are four guiding factors that must enter the discussion of defining theology.³

1. Theology’s primary source is Scripture.
 - a. John 1:14
 - i. “Word”: John already defined the Word as none other than the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:1-4).
 - ii. “became flesh”: The perfect nature of God and the pre-fall, perfect nature of man united in the one person of Jesus. The two natures remain distinct so that the nature of God remains complete in Jesus and the pre-fall perfect nature of man remains complete in Jesus. He is the God-man. Fully God and fully man in the one person of Jesus Christ. It should be noted that it is on these two matters, the nature of God and man in Jesus, that most heresies and cults have emerged. Most cults groups have in some way either denied the deity or the humanity of Christ.
 - iii. “glory”: We will study the glory of God in later lessons. For the purpose of context, share with your students that glory is most often used in reference to God making Himself known to man. Jesus revealed the glory of God in that, being God, He made known to man all the character and nature of God by coming as a man. As Jesus “dwelt among us” He made known to us the God that was previously only knowable through the Old

¹ Alister McGrath observes, “At some point, it had to be asked which god Christians were talking about, and how this god relates to the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” who figure so prominently in the Old Testament. The doctrine of the Trinity appears to have been, in part, a response to the pressure to identify the god that the Christian theologians were speaking about.” See Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology*, pp 117-118.

² James Orr states, “He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny found only in Christianity.” See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 20.

³ Millard Erickson, *Systematic Theology*, 21-22.

Testament writings. He made God known as the personal God that walks with man and loves man enough to give His own life that man might be saved through Him.

b. II Timothy 3:16ff

i. The doctrine of inspiration will be presented in later lessons. For the purpose of context, share with your students that Scripture is not only given for our information but also for life transformation. There should be a difference in our lives as a result of time in the Word.

ii. “beneficial”: Paul reminds Timothy that Scripture was not given for mere satisfaction of intellectual curiosity. Scripture is for a greater purpose than simply answering our questions about the character and nature of God. Paul asserts that all Scripture is beneficial to all believers. Scripture is designed to enable believers to meet the requirements of faithful living before a Holy God. This verse is Paul’s Magna Carta on putting theology into action. Theological studies that do not lead to life transformation are studies that have not yet touched the heart of God.

2. Theology can be developed into a system.

a. One of the dangers in biblical studies is to disregard the context in which a particular passage of Scripture is written. It is equally as dangerous to employ one passage of Scripture when discussing God without the benefit of the entire Bible shedding light on that one passage. There are many great commentaries, but no greater commentary on Scripture exists than Scripture. It is critical to correctly teach and read Scripture to understand where a particular passage fits within the entire context of the Bible.

b. Systematic Theology combines the study of the Bible, historical contributions to the study of Scripture, and current issues in biblical studies in order to demonstrate the applicability of the ancient text. As we study theology examples from history as well as current events both will serve as helpful insights into God’s plan for His people.

3. Theology must be contemporary.

a. Two dangers exist in contemporizing theology. First, there is the danger of watering down the gospel in order to make it sound relevant to current culture. As a teacher, you must continually keep before your students the truth that Scripture is relevant because it is absolute truth. Scripture does not become relevant by our efforts to communicate it accurately; it is relevant because real truth is timeless. The manner in which we present this truth will either accurately reflect its nature or inaccurately reflect its nature. Second, there is the danger of antiquating the gospel by using language that is either non-biblical or non-understandable in the modern market place. It is unnecessary and in most contexts unwise to use Old English in order to maintain doctrinal integrity. *Thee* and *Thou* are not in the original languages in which Scripture was written. The timeless truths of Scripture can be communicated in a modern manner without compromising the integrity of the Bible.

b. In his preface to *What Are They Saying about Theological Method*, J.J. Mueller stated, “A method is a tool...it extends our abilities, improves upon our limitations, reminds us of forgotten procedures, and allows others to see how we arrived at our conclusions.”

4. Theology must be practical.

- a. The Four Core Competencies of Theology Driven Ministry should be evident in every believer's life. Our next four lessons will examine each of the competencies. These are the competencies you should begin to see in the lives of the people in your class as you teach theology.
 - i. Biblical Thinking
 - ii. Biblical Living
 - iii. Biblical Relating
 - iv. Biblical Proclaiming
- b. Theology is more than just a belief system. One's theology will be reflected in the manner he/she lives life.

B. A Definition

Obviously, theology involves more than a mere dictionary definition. However, it is important to clearly state a definition for theology in order to lay a clear and solid foundation on which to build all other discussions relating to God.

1. Millard Erickson states that theology is, "That discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life."⁴
2. Alister McGrath states, "Theology is reflection upon the God whom Christians worship and adore."⁵
3. Our definition of theology that will serve as the foundation for the next three years of study is: Theology is a conversation about God and for His glory that is according to Scripture, stated in contemporary language, related to life issues and accurately represents who God has revealed Himself, so that believers may honor Him and unbelievers may be saved.

II. Why Do We Need Theology?

Some believers may contend that the discussion of theology should be reserved solely for those in higher schools of learning. However, "In its first annual report on the state of faith relations in countries spanning four continents, Gallup and the Coexist Foundation find Americans and Canadians are more likely than European respondents surveyed to be classified as 'integrated.'"⁶ The report defines integrated cultures as those that are made up of people who believe most faiths make a positive contribution to society and of people who are interested in discussing and learning about other faiths. Americans are becoming less and less isolated within their religious beliefs and more and more open to discussing theology than ever before. All Christians need to be able to accurately discuss theology for it is the open door God is using to impact our culture with the gospel.

1. The Health of the Church⁷

⁴ Erickson, 21.

⁵ McGrath, 117.

⁶ [<http://www.gallup.com/poll/118273/Canada-Show-Interfaith-Cohesion-Europe.aspx>] viewed on May 12, 2009.

⁷ Erickson, 28ff.

- a. Theology is essential to the health of believers.
 - i. In Matthew 16:13-19 Peter speaks correctly about God in his response to Jesus' question. It was not enough for Peter to simply love Jesus; Jesus required that Peter had a right understanding of who He was in order to have a right relationship with Him. One could not have a right relationship with a friend if he continually misrepresents that friend's nature, attitudes and actions in his conversation.
 - 1. Verse 16 is a short confession but affirms what is contained in our profession of faith.⁸
 - 2. "Son of the living God": "Peter did not yet understand distinctly in what way Christ was the begotten of God; he was so fully persuaded of the dignity of Christ, that he believed Him to come from God, not like other men, but by the inhabitation of the true and living Godhead in his flesh."⁹
 - ii. In Romans 10:9-10 Paul equates a right understanding of the nature and activities of Jesus with the very prayer of faith that leads to salvation. Just as no man can rightfully marry a woman whom he does not know, no man can rightfully come to Jesus without knowledge of His Lordship and resurrection.
 - 1. "Lord": No Jew would make such a confession had they not understood Jesus as being God, for the word used for Lord is the same as that used for God in the Old Testament. No Gentile would make such a confession had they not turned from calling all other rulers and idols Lord. This one word is central to all men in their confession of faith in Christ alone.
 - 2. "raised": The resurrection is the pivotal event in world history. It is the hinge on which the door of our salvation hangs. To believe in the resurrection is not a mere intellectual assent to a historical occurrence. This belief is a confession of faith in Christ as the sole means of eternal life.
- b. Theology is essential to measuring experience.
 - i. Adolf Hitler's favorite philosopher was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Nietzsche believed that man was beyond good and evil and sought to replace the Christian moral standard with a standard of man-centered right and wrong. Nietzsche's philosophy became a reality in Hitler's "might makes right" view of life. When we remove right theology from the world, man's experience of success is measured by his own desire and pursued by his own means of achievement. Without right theology believers will direct the affairs of their lives by what seems right. Proverbs 14:12 provides the insight on the end result of such a life.
 - ii. Max Hocutt observes, "The fundamental question of ethics is, who makes the rules? God or men? The theistic answer is that God makes them. The humanist

⁸No man can confess Christ apart from the revelation of the Father (Matt 11:27 ff) and the witness of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). A right confession about Christ is important to salvation (1 John 2:22-23; 5:10). From Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament. Copyright © 1992 by Chariot Victor Publishing, an imprint of Cook Communication Ministries. All rights reserved.)

⁹Calvin's Commentaries, PC Study Bible formatted electronic database Copyright © 2005-2006 by BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved.

answer is that men make them. This distinction between theism and humanism is the fundamental division in moral theory.”¹⁰ A right theology will lead to right decisions on the part of believers. In John 14:15, Jesus reminds His followers that loving Him (which we saw in Peter’s statement above means more than emotion) will involve right living in obedience to Him.

iii. Theology is essential to battle the massive information facing believers.

1. Universalism says that God is too loving to send anyone to hell for eternity. A right view of God dispels such an emotional man-centered claim.
 2. Pluralism says that all religions are basically the same and that all will be saved through whatever faith they follow. A right view of God dispels such an emotional man-centered claim.
 3. Inclusivism says that all people will be saved through Christ’s death regardless if they know Him or not. A right view of God dispels such an emotional man-centered claim.
 4. Atheism says that no God exists beyond the universe or in the universe. A right view of God dispels such an emotional man-centered claim.
 5. Mormons believe that the Bible has errors and have supplemented the Scripture with other writings. A right view of God dispels such an emotional man-centered claim.
 6. Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Jesus was merely an angel. A right view of God dispels such an emotional man-centered claim.
 7. Muslims deny Jesus as the Son of God, deny the resurrection and assert that the Bible is untrustworthy and the Qu’ran is flawless. A right view of God dispels such an emotional man-centered claim.
- Your job as a teacher is to equip your students to think correctly about God in order that they may speak correctly about God, and defend the faith against such erroneous beliefs.

2. The Hope of the Community

- a. How will we respond to a community so engulfed by a wrong view of God? How will we reach a community that is so certain that life is in their hands and that God is not who He revealed Himself to be in the Bible? The starting point is equipping ourselves to be able to converse with our community in a way that accurately represents God.
- b. First Peter 3:15 is a pivotal answer to the question, “Why Do We Need Theology?”
 - i. “sanctify”: theological studies begin and continue out of a heart that has been willfully set aside to be used of God.
 - ii. “Lord”: the primary issue in a believer’s life is the issue of Christ’s Lordship over all. Since Christ is Lord over all, He is Lord over our hearts, minds, and wills. When a believer offers his heart to Jesus, he is offering himself up to be used of God as a mouth piece that accurately represents Christ in every conversation.

¹⁰ Max Hocutt, "Toward an Ethic of Mutual Accommodation," in *Humanist Ethics*, ed. Morris B. Storer (Buffalo:Prometheus, 1980), p. 137.

- iii “and”: This little conjunction reminds us that Lordship is not merely an inward yielding of one’s life to Christ, but results in outward living that represents Christ.
- iv. “answer”: The Greek word for answer is where we get our English word “apologetic.” Apologetic means to defend. We are called by God to be ready to give a defense for our faith. Theological study is necessary for a believer to be faithful to God.
- v. “to every man that asks”: This is not a call for believers to passively wait on someone to come to them, but rather a call for living that is so Christ honoring that people will want to know the difference whenever they see the believer.
- vi. “with”: A warning to avoid the self-sufficient tendencies of someone that is well versed in theology, but rather to always depend on Christ as the central person in theology to guide and give all that is needed to defend the faith.
- vii. “fear”: This is the attitude of a believer who has a right view of God as well as the right view of the frailty of man’s soul. We defend our faith with confidence in the power of the Word, but with fear of the power of God who alone changes lives.
- viii. “in you”: This verse begins and ends with the priority of the gospel being in the person giving a defense. Defending the faith is academic in nature (you must know what you believe), but it begins with a heart in love with Jesus and continues with a heart surrendered to Him alone.

The early church was not so much concerned about Systematic Theology as they were with defending the faith and fighting off heresies that threatened the integrity of the gospel. We have the benefit of 2000 years of church history that has placed theological issues in categories that are easy to study and comprehend. However, our mission in studying theology must not stray far from that of the first believers. We must study how to accurately converse with a lost world about the great truths God has revealed about Himself. It is to this end we teach Theology Driven Ministry and to this end that we pray God will raise up a new generation of faith defenders for His glory and fame in the world.