



Reformation
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THEOLOGY:
WHY BOTHER?

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We must not at all depart from the evangelical precepts. Disciples should observe and do the same things that the Master both taught and did. . . . So, then, neither the apostle himself nor an angel from heaven can preach or teach anything other than what Christ has once taught and that his apostles have announced. Therefore, I wonder very much from where this practice has originated. For it is contrary to evangelical and apostolic discipline.

CYPRIAN (A.D. 250)

Theology is the first activity of thinking and speaking about God (theologizing), and second the product of that activity (Luther's theology, or Wesley's, or Finney's, or Wimber's, or Packer's, or whoever's). As an activity, theology is a cat's cradle of interrelated though distinct disciplines: elucidating texts (exegesis), synthesizing what they say on things they deal with (biblical theology), seeing how the faith was stated in the past (historical theology), formulating it for today (systematic theology), finding its implications for conduct (ethics), commending and defending it as truth and wisdom (apologetics), defining the Christian task in the world (missiology), stockpiling resources for life in Christ (spirituality) and corporate worship (liturgy), and exploring ministry (practical theology).

JAMES I. PACKER
CONCISE THEOLOGY (1993)

Why Study Theology?



A. T. B. McGowan

The question of why we should study theology is asked by a number of people, especially these days. It is a question often raised, especially in a context where theology seems arcane, unpractical, and overly academic. It is raised in a variety of contexts. Does it really matter in the end? Why or why not?

Sometimes this question is raised by young students, anxious to get into a pulpit or away to the mission field, who regard three or more years of full-time study as a waste of valuable time. Sometimes it is raised by those of more mature years, who wish to serve as pastors but who regard theological training as superfluous because, they argue, they have read quite widely over the years and have considerable experience. Sometimes it is raised by rather naïve Christians, often in a somewhat supercilious manner, who suggest that an acquaintance with Scripture is sufficient for anyone preparing for Christian ministry and that to study theology is both unnecessary and probably unwise. It is even raised by those who are asked to support potential pastors through theological college and who grudge the expense, believing that the necessary training could easily be "picked up" while serving as an assistant pastor. Sometimes it is raised by those who are fearful of what might happen when a student is exposed to theological writing which is not (by their standards) orthodox.

One can understand why these arguments might be raised against the study of theology. Certainly in the case of the last example one might well have some sympathy. Ultimately, however, none of these arguments stand up to serious scrutiny, because the study of theology is so important to the life of the church and because there are, on the positive side, so many good reasons for engaging in the study of theology. I would like to consider six.

1. TO UNDERSTAND THE SCRIPTURES

The first reason for the study of theology is that we might obtain a better understanding of Scripture. If we believe that the Bible is the Word of God, that it is breathed-out by God (2 Timothy 3:16) and that those who wrote it did so because they were being carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21) then we will want to learn what it teaches. The study of theology, at its best, is a structured attempt to obtain knowledge of God. In order to do so, we must understand the Bible and reflect upon its teaching.

Now, as we noted above, there are some people who believe that theology is a dangerous subject, which should not be studied by anyone! The reason given for this view is that many theologians deny the truths of the Bible and so to study what such theologians say or have written is dangerous to our spiritual health. Even J. I. Packer, one of the most distinguished evangelical theologians, used to take this view. In his foreword to the book, *Know the Truth* by Bruce Milne,¹ he explains that initially he didn't want to study theology because of all the bad things he had heard about it. Then he describes how he came to change his mind about the study of theology, and he commends theology in this way:

It has been said that a habit of personal Bible study makes the study of theology unnecessary. But in fact you penalize yourself as a Bible student by not studying theology, for theology (that is, an overall grasp of Bible teaching) enriches Bible study enormously. How? By enabling you to see more of what is there in each passage.

Packer is undoubtedly correct in this assessment. In particular, we can identify several aspects of biblical study which are vital to any real understanding of the Bible, namely, historical, theological and exegetical study.

Historical

Many people who have been reading their Bibles for years do not understand the structure and outline of the Bible. They may know many (or even most) of the biblical characters and their stories but have little grasp of the overall structure of God's revelation and its historical development. How many people in our churches could accurately chart the biblical story, say from Abraham until the return after the Exile, including a description of where each of the prophets fits into the story, and whether these prophets were based in the northern kingdom of Israel or in Judah?

Theological

The systematic study of theology provides the framework for a proper understanding of Scripture. Without understanding something of the nature and character of God, of sin and the Fall, of the person and work of Christ, and so on, it is impossible to understand the overall significance of each passage of Scripture. It is also the case that many Christians have no real acquaintance with biblical theology. In other words, they are unfamiliar with the way in which great themes like revelation, redemption and covenant draw the threads of biblical teaching together.

Exegetical

Most important of all, if someone is going to understand the Bible properly it is necessary to learn to handle God's Word carefully and faithfully. To do so, the study of exegesis (the opening out or explaining of the text) is absolutely necessary. To understand a passage of Scripture properly, it is essential that we understand the meaning and significance of the words used (in their original languages), the context in which these words are found in the Bible and the background against

which they were written. We have all heard (or even delivered!) sermons, which either bear no relation whatsoever to the supposed text, or which present a message quite foreign to that intended by the original author. What is said may be true and helpful but if it is not based on a careful and faithful exposition of the passage in question, then it is not sound exegetical study.

To Prepare for Christian Service

The second reason for studying theology is to prepare for Christian service. Indeed, there are many forms of Christian service that will be closed to you unless you have completed a period of theological study.

This ought certainly to be true of those elders who are called to labor in preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17) and whom we commonly call ministers or pastors. One of the great concerns of the Reformation was that men and women should have the Bible in their own languages and that they should be taught the Bible by those who were competent to teach because they themselves had studied.

But why should the minister spend so much time in serious theological study? Surely there are sufficient tools available to support the minister, such that this is unnecessary? To answer that question, we must go back to the time immediately prior to the Reformation.

At that time, the church was in a very bad state. It is not only Protestant historians and theologians who say this. It is generally agreed. I have read and spoken to Roman Catholic theologians who agree that the church was in need of Reformation. Some of them even commend much of what Luther said and what he tried to achieve. Perhaps the greatest single problem with the church in the late Middle Ages was the clergy. Many of them were uneducated and incompetent, and in many instances they were also morally and spiritually unsuitable. Many of them could barely read!

Then along came the Renaissance and the rise of humanism. (Not the atheistic humanism of our day but a scholarly interest in the humanities, not least the classic writings of earlier days.) The great significance of humanism was in return-

ing people to the original texts in their original languages. At first the texts which the humanists studied were the great Latin and Greek classical texts but gradually they became interested in ancient Christian writings (especially the New Testament and the writings of the early church fathers) and began to study them. Many of these writers began to see that what they were reading had implications for the church.

When scholars began to engage in this discipline, it had considerable significance for Christian theology. In particular, it had the effect of bringing to light many of the mistakes in the Latin Vulgate translation. Not only so, but a number of doctrines and church practices were based on these mistranslations of the original, so that careful scholarly study of the original texts led to doctrinal reform. The humanist slogan was *ad fontes* (back to the original sources). Here we have the beginning of the modern understanding of biblical scholarship.

When the Reformation took place, many of its leading thinkers, including Calvin, had come under the influence of humanism. As a result, one of the driving forces in the Reformation movement was a determination that never again would preachers be ignorant and unable to handle the text of Scripture. Hence in all the Reformed churches there was a tremendous emphasis on the need for an educated ministry. Even today, in many places, Reformed pastors have to spend six years at university. For the same reason, until very recently, Hebrew and Greek were compulsory subjects in theological colleges. It was regarded as vital that anyone preaching the Word of God should be able to handle for himself the original text in its original languages and not be dependent on others. When we say, then, that teaching elders ought to be scholars of the Word, we are standing in a great tradition.

Many of those who study theology, however, have no intention of becoming pulpit preachers. It certainly used to be the case that virtually the only people who studied theology were those who intended to become ministers, but that has changed. Some may become counselors, or serve on the staff of a church. Others may become school teachers, youth workers or social workers. Some may simply be preparing them-

selves to be more useful in their local church. The study of theology is useful for all such people, because they too will often be called upon to handle the Word of God, even on a one-to-one basis. We cannot teach others, if we have not learned ourselves first. There is no quicker way of testing whether or not you have grasped a truth than to try to teach that truth to someone else! If you are not clear in your own mind, it will quickly become apparent.

There is a crying need today for well-informed Christians to teach theology at every level of church life, not least at Sunday School level. In places where there has been no evangelical ministry, the situation is even worse because often people have been starved of real knowledge and understanding, through the impact of liberal theology.

To Understand Christian Doctrine

The third reason for the study of theology is to understand Christian doctrine. The Bible does not say everything about any particular subject in one place. You have to study everything the Bible says on a subject before you can develop a "doctrine." Perhaps the best way to explain this is by giving a couple of examples.

There are many theological words in the Bible which repay careful study. The first thing you ought to be able to do is to show where the word appears in Scripture and to say something about the different ways it is used. When you go a step further and ask what the word means and how it relates to other aspects of Christian teaching, then you are beginning to do theology—you are beginning to engage in the study of Christian doctrine.

The word "repentance" is a case in point. Most Christians will have some understanding of the word repentance and might be able to give some explanation of its meaning. The difficulty only arises when we ask a few pertinent questions, such as the following: Do you repent in order to receive God's forgiveness, or does God forgive you before you repent? Is repentance a condition of grace or is grace unconditional? What is the relationship between repentance and conversion

or between repentance and justification? How can someone who is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1) repent?

Do you see the point? There are literally dozens of biblical words which we regularly use and yet we do not stop to ask ourselves what they mean, or else we may have only the haziest notion of what they mean.

There are other words that are not in the Bible but which are important, for example, the word "Trinity". If we met someone who denied the divinity of Christ could we show from the Bible where we get the idea that God is one Being but three Persons? Could we go on to explain why the doctrine of the Trinity is so crucial to Christianity?

The end result of this process is a proper understanding of Christian doctrine. This is a life-long task and will never be completed. It is, however, exciting as day by day we see and understand things we had never comprehended before.

4. TO CLARIFY CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

The fourth reason for the study of theology is the need to clarify Christian doctrine. From time to time in the history of the church there has been disagreement within the church concerning particular doctrines. The task of theology in such circumstances is to clarify the doctrine on the basis of the teaching of Scripture.

One example of this need to clarify Christian doctrine concerned the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. There were certain key events in the establishment of this doctrine. Perhaps the most significant of these was when Arius, who was a presbyter from Alexandria, began to teach that Jesus was a created being rather than God incarnate.

Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, opposed Arius. He insisted that Jesus was truly divine. Eventually Arius and his followers were excommunicated. By this time, however, Arius had sought and found help and support from outside Egypt and the matter became more than a local case of church discipline. In particular he enlisted the help of a number of bishops who shared his views.

The emperor Constantine came to power in A.D. 324 with

a strong desire for a united Christianity in a united empire, and he called the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 to settle the matter of the relation between the Son and the Father.

Alexander and his party insisted on using the word *homoousios* to describe Jesus Christ. It means, "of the same substance." Arius rejected this, of course. There was another group in between, a moderate party, who wanted a compromise. This group was led by the great church historian Eusebius, who was a much better historian than he was a theologian. This group is usually referred to as "semi-Arians." This middle group wanted to substitute the word *homoiousios* for the word *homoousios*. This compromise word *homoiousios* meant "of similar substance." This underlines the complexity of the matter. Here was a major theological battle and it rested on one Greek letter, and the difference made by this one Greek letter was colossal.

These three groups, then, met at Nicaea to settle the matter once and for all. The Council (after the emperor intervened) concluded that what Alexander and Athanasius said was orthodox and rejected the Arian and the semi-Arian positions. The word *homoousios* was affirmed. This meant that the Church was stating unambiguously that Jesus Christ was a divine Person and was of one substance, or one being, with the Father. The matter didn't end there, however, and the battle went on for a long time. Eventually, however, the Council of Constantinople met in 381 and affirmed what had been agreed at Nicaea.

This is just one example of the way in which theological study is vital in seeking to clarify the doctrine of the church. In our day, there are those who promote theological views which, on the surface, appear to be biblical but which, on closer examination, can be seen to be heretical. How can we judge such matters without understanding theology?

5. TO DEFEND CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

The fifth reason for the study of theology is to enable us to defend the faith. Christianity is under attack today from many sides. It is necessary that we should be able to defend

what we believe. This is called apologetics.

What is apologetics? The word apologetics is somewhat unfortunate today because it suggests that we are apologizing for being Christians, but that would be to misunderstand the word. Originally, to give an apology for the faith meant to defend the faith. The word apologetics comes from a Greek word meaning "defense" and so apologetics can be defined as the "defense of the faith." The classic passage of Scripture for an understanding of apologetics is 1 Peter 3:15,16: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." In that passage the Greek literally says "ready always for defense to everyone asking," and the word for defense is *apologian*.

We ought also to notice that 1 Peter 3:15,16 appears in a context and with a significant *qualification*. The context is to be found in the words immediately prior to the text, where we find Peter saying "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord." The point being made is this: apologetics is done in the context of a recognition of the Lordship of Christ. Apologetics is not some intellectual game to be played by those on the periphery of faith, it is an evangelistic task carried out by those who recognize Christ as Lord.

The qualification comes immediately afterwards. Having told his readers to be prepared to give a reason for their hope Peter adds "but do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience." That is to say, apologetics is not to be carried out in a spirit of anger or bitterness or rancor, nor are we to seek to humiliate, embarrass or intellectually destroy those to whom we are speaking. The manner in which we engage in apologetics is as important as the arguments themselves.

We can sum up, then, by saying that apologetics is that part of theology concerned with the defense of the faith, this defence to be carried out in the context of the Lordship of Christ and in a gentle and respectful manner. To fulfill this task properly requires the study of theology.

6. TO GROW SPIRITUALLY

The sixth reason for the study of theology is to grow spiri-

tually. If we engage in the study of theology simply to achieve some human objective (being appointed as a pastor) or because of the intellectual and mental stimulation we might receive through our studies, then we will ultimately miss the point. In our study of the things of the faith, the key objective is to know God better and to experience spiritual growth.

There are many theologians who, sadly, are merely academics and who treat their subject as if it were the same as any other discipline. That is most unfortunate. We can only study theology properly if we are believers. That is the thrust of what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

If, then, as believers, we study theology it ought to produce fruit in our lives. We are, after all, turning our attention to the most important subject of all, the one who can never be a subject of our inquiry without himself being the great subject who addresses us in his Word and calls us to fresh obedience in every act and task, not least the task of being theologians.

Author

A. T. B. McGowan serves as Principal of the Highland Theological College. This is a recently established (1994) theological college, which is theologically Reformed and non-denominational. It is located in Dingwall, in the beautiful Highlands of Scotland.

Dr. McGowan is a graduate of Aberdeen University (B. D. and Ph. D.) and Union Theological Seminary, New York (S. T. M.). He is a minister of the Church of Scotland and served for fourteen years as a parish minister.

Dr. McGowan is married to June, a nurse, who works with Alzheimer's patients. The McGowan's have three sons.

Dr. McGowan is the author of *The New Birth* (Christian Focus Publications, 1996) and *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston* (Paternoster Press, 1997). He has also edited and/or written chapters for several books and has contributed to several theological and historical dictionaries. Dr. McGowan is

an adjunct professor of theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, a visiting professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary and vice-president of the World Reformed Fellowship.

Notes

1. Inter Varsity Press (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1982).