

THE NECESSITY OF THEOLOGY

What's the Point and Why Bother? Why study doctrine and theology at all?

"If I use my intellectual capacities to make myself respectable to the world, as it is in revolution against the one who created it, then I have failed. It is equally true if I use my ignorance for the same purpose. I am to face the cross of Christ is every part of life and with my whole man. The cross of Christ is to be a reality to me not only once for all at my conversion, but all through life as a Christian." *(Francis Schaeffer)*

Introduction

As an introduction (and not just for the sake of cultural trendiness), I want to begin with a story, a little tale about four different students:

Once upon a time in the village of Soundville there lived four young A-Level students. All attended the same church – an evangelical church that had charismatic worship, lots of nice songs on a Sunday morning, a slightly eccentric but very wise minister who taught the Bible faithfully, and a brilliant youth worker. All four students attended all the youth events and were committed Christians. Now when the time came to decide on University courses they all chose to do theology as they decided they would all like to learn more about God. So off they went into the big wide world, to four different theology departments. Here's what happened to them ...

The first student was called Simon Submitter. Simon arrived in Week one and immediately found that while a few lecturers seemed quite conservative, some were hostile to evangelicals, and some openly derided any form of conservative belief about the Bible. Simon soon found his beliefs attacked and his confident youth club faith began to give way to a steady stream of doubts – he began to feel silly for being a believer. When the time came to graduate Simon openly called himself an atheist – the only thing he believed in was the assured results of biblical criticism and he headed off to do a PhD on the psychology of religious illusion.

The next student was Rachel Repressor. Rachel faced all the same issues as Simon in her college but instead dealt with them by blocking them out. She attended lectures faithfully and worked hard but refused to believe anything she was studying at all. Rachel became very actively involved in the Christian Union and became convinced that Theology was of no importance for Christian faith – as it was all liberal the only approach was to ignore it. She graduated, married a Christian chap from the CU, and lived her Christian life adamant that Christians should not study Theology.

¹ Francis Schaeffer, True Spirituality (London: Hodder, 1971), 42.

Then there was Sarah Segregator. She too faced all the same issues as Simon and Rachel but she had a very clever solution: she would have one Bible for lectures and one Bible for CU and Church. In the margins of her academic Bible she would take notes on all the critical theories – notes on JEDP, the Synoptic problem, problems of mistakes and contradictions; in the margin of her church Bible she wrote notes from sermons and faithfully said “Thus says the Lord” on Sunday morning when the Bible was read. She pretended to believe the liberals and write what they wanted to hear in her essays but secretly still held on to conservative beliefs: Sarah led a double life. She claimed that the liberal theology never really bothered her but for the rest of her life on Sunday mornings as she wrote in her church Bible, she kept getting flashbacks to the margins of her other Bible – inaccurate, untrue, contradictory. The doubts always nagged at her and she nostalgically longed for a return to her youth club faith – if only she’d never studied Theology.

Then finally, there was Ian Integrator. Ian actually struggled more than most of the other three students initially – he was thrown off track by very clever lecturers who made his beliefs look very silly indeed. Ian persevered with his courses and began to read around the subjects; the more he read and searched bibliographies the more he began to discover other viewpoints on the subject. He began to discover evangelical scholarship even though it was never on the reading list and he began to find that there were sensible answers to his questions. The more he studied, the more questions he had but as he continued to give himself to evangelism, to CU and to church the more he began to discover answers to earlier questions. Ian graduated and now works in business – the struggle of his degree has made him a clear and honest thinker and he spends his spare time as a youth worker faithfully teaching his young people to repent and believe the gospel.

Does any of this sound familiar? Okay, so it is a story soaked with stereotypes that lack subtlety: we are all guilty of submitting, repressing and segregating doubts and questions as we live our Christian lives. With striving to integrate as the ideal we see that Ian is the brave hero of our story!

Enough of the fantasy, let’s talk about reality. We have all seen those studying theology not at all bothered about studying theology – not at all concerned that what they are learning maybe should bother them at all. In fact we see Christians studying everything from Physics to Sports Sciences, Geography to Tourism that submit to, repress and segregate what they have been learning without much of a struggle to integrate their faith and their study.

Apathy of this kind is in many ways harder to combat (or recognise when it is a fault in ourselves) than open hostility and I am sure that the origin of this apathy is a theologically apathetic evangelical church, the genesis of which I will leave for others to discuss. The point I wish to make is that I try to remind people why we bother studying theology in general, be it in Sunday school or seminar, because if we do not see the point of theology in the first place then we will never see the point of integrating faith and life. Submitting to error, repressing challenges and segregating life are not just issues facing students: it is of immense proportions in the whole of life and impacts the way in which congregations listen to sermons on a Sunday morning as much as it does theological students at university Monday to Friday.

So why bother with theology?

Here are a few thoughts and comments that I have pinched mainly from greater minds than my own!

1) Because it is unavoidable – *Theological ignorance is a myth*

You may have heard (or said!) things like this before: 'Don't study theology because it will destroy your faith'; 'I don't think about things like that, I leave that to the theologians'; 'Theologians, are too rationalistic, too propositional, they put God into a box, and are not open enough' etc. etc.

The problem with all of these statements is that they forget the unavoidability and inescapability of theology and theological claims. To misquote a well-known Reebok advert 'Theology is going to get you....' As the Lutheran theologian Marty states 'There will inevitably be theology: will it be good or bad, conscious or unconscious, disciplined or diffuse?'²

It may be an irritating cliché, but the statement 'theology is not important' is in fact a theological statement!!! If we choose unconsciously to accept everything we ever hear about God and me and my life and never question it; so be it! That is not how I want to live and that is still not 'not being theological'! In summary: **we cannot refuse to be theologians!**

Now of course, what some people do is to confuse objections to *particular* doctrinal convictions and masquerade them as objections to doctrine in *general*. Therefore when some say it's not theology and doctrine that's important, what they are really saying is that they disagree with *your* particular theological framework and doctrinal formulation.

² Martin E. Marty, 'Foreword,' in Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963). xiv.

Here are some common examples of the way theology and doctrine is wrongly juxtaposed with other things:

- **Forget theology, it's all about praxis³ ('it's what you do that matters not what you think')!**

We cannot say that we don't bother thinking and reflecting about things but only do them. Doctrine shapes our praxis. At no point does Paul ever say that doctrine is indifferent and that it is only practice that matters. The two are inextricably linked and balance the other.

- **Forget theology, it's all about my personal relationship with Jesus!**

Gary Johnson makes a good point here:

"An undogmatic Christianity is no Christianity at all. We are often told that Christianity is a person, but on pain of reducing it to magic, which would no longer possess any ethical and, consequently any religious quality, we must grant that Christianity, precisely because it is essentially a person, is also a body of facts and ideas. When the apostle Paul declared "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), he was defining a special doctrine of Jesus as the essence of Christianity."⁴

The stuff of real personal relationships is trust – and trust requires knowing who the other person in the relationship is:

"One cannot trust someone whom one does not know; and, if one does know the person, then one can inevitably express certain truths about the person using formulas of words – and that at its simplest is what Christian doctrine is!"⁵

1 Jn 1:1 says this: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and touched with our hands – this we proclaim to you concerning the Word of Life.'

Commenting on this Tinker writes:

³ "Praxis – the practice of an art, science or skill as opposed to theory; formal customary practice or conduct. " Penguin English Dictionary 2002

⁴ Gary L. W. Johnson, 'Does Theology Still Matter?' in ed. John H. Armstrong, The Coming Evangelical Crisis (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 67.

⁵ Carl Trueman, Christianity, Liberalism and the New Evangelicalism: Lesson from Gresham Machen (Bristol: Onesium, 2002), 7.

‘The apostles’ experience of Jesus was not simply some existential ‘I-Thou’ encounter which led them to search around for appropriate concepts to experience that experience. Rather the experience itself involved hearing propositional truths – teachings – received from Jesus about his person and work, explained within the framework of the OT Scriptures.”⁶

Trueman puts it another way:

Doctrinal indifferentism – that attitude which regards the individual’s or church’s experience of Christ as essentially separable from, or more important than, or even opposed to, a clear understanding of his person and work... had little or nothing to do with historic, orthodox Christianity. We must not allow the rhetoric and language of personal relationships to be used as a means of downplaying the crucial importance of clear, orthodox doctrine. If we are to have a personal relationship with anyone, then that relationship depends upon a sure knowledge of who that person is and what they are like...When we keep in mind that doctrine is part and parcel of our personal knowledge of who Christ is, the danger in downplaying doctrine becomes crystal clear.⁷

In other words we have to challenge the assumption that says...

- **Forget theology, it’s all about experience!**

‘Experience unites doctrine divides’ is a slogan that is sometimes bandied about. What is meant by it is that as Christians we all have the same experience of God but understand it differently, and that is where disagreements start. However this statement fails to note the proper relationship between doctrine and experience. It is not pedantic to ask which comes first doctrine or experience for although doctrine can help us to interpret experience, it is through biblical truth that one comes to experience the Living God: “doctrine informs experience, it structures and interprets it, it is the means by which we come to experience God.”⁸

One implication of this is this: to get doctrine wrong will mean something other than genuine Christian experience. Again Melvin Tinker gives a good personal example of this:

When I was a student we had a speaker at the Christian Union who, with impressive rhetoric, told us that he had received a ‘word for the Lord’ loosely

⁶ Melvin Tinker, Evangelical Concerns (Fearn, Mentor, 2001), 90

⁷ Trueman, 8.

⁸ Tinker, 90.

based on John 15 that there were two types of Christian: those who are friends of God and those who are servants of God. The servants of God had a dutiful service, but the friends of God were those having being baptised by the Spirit knew a joy and intimacy which the others could only envy. 'Which are you?' he challenged. 'Which do you want to be?' he enquired. The answer of course was a foregone conclusion. Practically everyone in the meeting, including myself, felt impressed, convicted, and cast down. But was such an experience 'Christian'? The answer must be 'no', for no such division of Christians is to be found in Scripture and no alleged 'filling' of the Spirit is proffered as a solution. The truly Christian experience came for me when, in reflecting upon what was said in the light of Scripture, I saw the teaching to be bogus and realised afresh the wonderful liberty of being a child of God.⁹

- **Forget theology, it's all about having a simple faith!**

People say that they are not great thinkers but are content to have a 'simple faith' Fair enough as not everyone has the same level of intellect as say a John Calvin. However we must not mistake varying intellect with deliberate ignorance. A child can proclaim 'Jesus is Lord' and truly understand something of what this means. The most erudite theology professor can proclaim 'Jesus is Lord', have a rich understanding of this statement and still not get to bottom of what it fully means. Both believe 'Jesus is Lord' and are right in their proclamation, as opposed to both having wrong ideas about who Jesus is. A 'simple faith' is not an excuse for believing error, and as I note below, for our own spiritual health we need to believe the truth.

2) Because our life depends on it – *Theological ignorance is not bliss*

- **The personal nature of theology**

One of the common perceptions of doctrine and theological study is that it is boring and irrelevant to our lives. However nothing could be further from the truth because doctrine is basically about who God is and what God has done, and who we are and how we are to live. John Frame simply defines theology as "the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life"¹⁰

Let's start with God first. What we are saying is that to do theology properly is to get to know God better, as in any relationship. The Bible tells us all we need to know about the living God and how we are to relate to him. Just as it is very embarrassing to get someone's name wrong

⁹ Tinker, 92.

¹⁰ John Frame, The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), 81.

because we have not been thoughtful enough to learn it, how stupid is it to say we love God and worship Him and yet get his name wrong and address him incorrectly because we have not spent the time learning who He is. Indeed to do this is inviting trouble because God reveals Himself to be a jealous God (Ex. 20:5), protective of his own Name, and so to get his name wrong and wilfully misrepresent him is a serious charge. But how many of us do it? I have been a Christian 10 years but it is only in the last 3 or 4 that I have really begun understand what it is to worship God and see the real implications of his Trinity.

Secondly there is what God has done. It main seem harsh to say it but a person who says that they do not care about theology essentially say that they do not care for the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is a message; a message about what God has done for us and to effect our salvation. Theological thought was inextricably wrapped up in our conversion (be that at 5 or 25) when we came to see who we were before God and what Christ had done on our behalf. You can't get more personal than that!

Following on from this, theology becomes the most practical project ever. Both Packer and Macleod note this:

Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives. As it would be cruel to an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to London, put him down without explanation in Trafalgar Square and leave him, as one who knew nothing of English or England, to fend for himself, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange and painful place, and life in it is a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lost your soul.¹¹

For the sake of our own souls we must know the full content of the word of God. I say that because it seems to me that many of our most pressing problems in areas of personal faith are due simply to ignorance. Problems of assurance, problems with depression and problems in coping with such traumas as bereavement often stem (at least in part) from either ignorance of Christian doctrine, or from a failure to apply it.¹²

- **The passionate nature of theology**

If theology is not only about knowing God and what he has done, but also about knowing God and knowing what he has done *for me* in Christ, then how can I be apathetic about it? How can I not

¹¹ Jim Packer, Knowing God (London: Hodder, 1973), 15.

¹² Donald Macleod, A Faith to Live By (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2001), 4

love my God with all my heart (cf. Deut. 6:5)? I want to praise God and thank Him, to be enthused about learning more about him. Notice that after the most difficult theological discussion that Paul engages in the book of Romans, his response is one of praise and worship (Rom. 11:32)! The more we learn about God and his gospel the more we will want to praise Him!

So many Christians don't get excited because they do not see the gospel in all its polyphonic and glorious Technicolor but rather settle for a little mono 'black and white' version. But just ponder on these questions for a few moments:

- Do you *know* the holy character of the Living God who created all things for his glory?
- Do you *know* who you were before you were saved: vessels of God's wrath, God-haters?
- Do you *know* what Christ accomplished on the cross, bearing the wrath of God on our behalf, and how the Spirit applies this to the believer, that we are justified by grace through faith and seen as righteous in God's sight?
- Do you *know* that Christ is coming again and that we will spend eternity with our Lord?

This is truly amazing!!! At the end of the day "an anaemic Christianity that is not virile enough to strive for the truth can never possess the nerve to die for it. A truth not worth defending very soon comes to be seen as a truth not worth professing."¹³

3) Because our spiritual health depends on it – *Theological ignorance cannot tell the difference between good and bad theology*

- **The nature of good theology**

What happens when we study good theology: The man whose delight is in the law of the Lord 'is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers' (Psalm 1:3-6). God's words are 'sweeter than honey to my mouth', 'are the joy of my heart'; God's promise is 'like one who finds great spoil' Paul links sound doctrine with Christian maturity – 1 Tim 3:6; Titus 1:1

- **The nature of bad theology**

Conversely, bad theology is described as gangrene (2Tim.2:14-18), is linked with immorality and those who teach bad theology are given a number of choice titles (and encouraged to have severe operations!) by Paul. Basically, persisting in believing bad theology is a sign of unbelief.

¹³ Johnson, 65f.

The Bible tells us that good theology is healthy and will have good consequences and bad theology is unhealthy and will have bad consequences. Knowing the above I want to be sure that I am constantly working hard to correctly understand the Bible myself: to grasp 'the pattern of sound teaching'. I do not want to be someone who is sincerely ignorant of biblical truth, or who sincerely misinterprets the Bible, or who is inconsistent, or who is deceived by those teaching bad theology or worse still deceives others through my bad theology.

4) Because our witnessing depends on it – *Theological ignorance cannot give a reason for the hope we have (1 Pet. 3:15)*

I have met some people who are keen to sloppily rush through their theological studies as quick as they can because as they see it their heart is in evangelism and they think their studies are holding them back in proclaiming the gospel. But...

- **A dying world does not need believers who don't know what they believe!**

First, if non-Christians ask you, who or what is God, Jesus, etc. what are we going to say: 'I'm not sure really' No! We want to tell them clearly the truth about God and man and this means we need to know ourselves what we believe on these things. Second, in speaking about Christ and the Gospel we need to get the facts right:

Because of the strong connection between the word of God and the Spirit of God and the vital place that human understanding plays in coming to Christ, a distorted presentation of the gospel will in all likelihood produce a distorted Christian experience... If no one knows what measles is then no one will be diagnosed as having measles.¹⁴

Theological study is all about knowing the Gospel so we can proclaim it boldly.

- **A dying world urgently needs believers who know what they believe**

Paul Blackham notes the following:

Theological study is not an optional extra, but is the definition of putting on the mind of Christ in the Christian life. A theologian is not simply someone who goes to college and sits in a study, but is someone who believes the gospel and wants to understand it so that it can be presented in all its spiritual, confrontational power to a dying world. Theology is about not being conformed to this world, but being conformed to the unseen reality of the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ the eternal Son of God, who by his Spirit will judge the world and re-create all things on the pattern of himself.¹⁵

5) Because the health of the Body of Christ depends on it – *Theological ignorance will not provide the teachers to feed and equip the church*

¹⁴ Paul Helm, [Beginnings: Spirit and Word in Conversion](#) (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986),

¹⁵ Paul Blackham, 'Knowing God – the Ministry of the Theologian'
{<http://freespace.virgin.net/lizzy.blackham/Papers/importdoctrine.htm>}

- **What is the purpose of our theologising? For the church or for the academy?**

God has given the church teachers and preachers and there is a chance that many of you will go into some kind of church leadership. First, it is essential that church leaders and preachers are leading and preaching on a solid foundation. Second, we must always keep the church in mind in our theological thinking. We must ask always what is point of studying doctrine and theology. Perhaps the reason for people thinking theology is irrelevant is because much academic theology that is done is 'ivory tower' stuff: unclear and irrelevant. The old adage, which claims that theology is only useful if it can be preached, is quite true and remains the test for valid theological study.

- **Personal and pastoral applications.**

Finally, while much of this apology has had an individualistic focus, there is a vital corporate dimension about theological study in terms of the Body of Christ to which we belong. Macleod notes that many of the churches problems "are really problems in relationships, and these are often the result of a defective Christology. We simply fail to live our lives in the light of the fact that in Christ, God shows Himself as the One whose nature it is to put the interests of others before His own."¹⁶

Thus studying doctrine is not a distraction from Christian life and ministry it is core to Christian life and ministry: neglect it and you neglect the calling to which you have been called. This is not a reality which should leave you feeling burdened and guilty, it is a freedom and a privilege which encourages each of us to both know God better and thus to serve him more faithfully.

¹⁶ Macleod, 4.