

## What is Theology?

I'm Michael Williams and this is 'God and His Word, ST200.' Let's take a look at the syllabus and get started, but even as we do that, let us not forget to start each evening in prayer. Let's pray together.

*Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your marvelous faithfulness and grace to us. As Your creatures and as Your people, we thank You for the opportunity that we have to come together as brothers and sisters in Christ, to this place, to lift up Your name, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, and to study Your Word. We pray that in this course as we study Your Person, Your Word, that we would do so faithfully, that we would seek to honor Your Word, and honor Your name. We pray Your blessings upon our studies and we pray Your blessings upon our lives. For it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

This course is 'God and His Word' and it is described this way in our catalogue: "An introduction to theology and hermeneutics and a study of the doctrines of revelation, Scripture, and God." This evening we are going to look at, or at least introduce, the issue of theology, give an introduction to the discipline, and then we will turn our attention to revelation and Scripture. At that point, we will look at issues in hermeneutics, interpretation of Scripture, and we will seek to give half of our course to the doctrine of God.

Text books—all students are required to read the following books. First of all, selections from Norman Geisler's book *Inerrancy*. Second, McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*. This is primarily related to the issue of hermeneutics. *Let the Reader Understand*: a very well-written book. Third, Gerald Bray's book, *The Doctrine of God*. Great books on the doctrine of God are few and far between. This is a very good one. It may not be a great one. Bray is a very good thinker but he is not always the most elegant writer. This is a book that you're going to have to pay very close attention to. You know how you can read many books by reading the first sentence of the paragraph and skimming the rest of it (we all know how to read that way). You cannot read the Bray book that way. He changes direction in the middle of paragraphs, which can be a little disconcerting, so if you are just skimming along, all of a sudden he is on a left turn and you go, "Where did that happen?" It is a book you will have to pay very close attention to. Just a little warning right up front: once you get to the Bray book, give it your close attention.

And finally, Calvin Seerveld's book, *Baalam's Apocalyptic* (now entitled *How to Read the Bible to Hear God Speak*), which you will be reading also in connection with hermeneutics. It is a short little book, out of print now. It is a comparative analysis of the Baalam story from Numbers and it presents four different approaches to reading the Baalam story: how an existentialist would read this story, how a classic liberal would read it, so on and so forth. I think you will find it an engaging read.

The first thing we want to do is struggle with the issue of definition. Defining the word 'theology' is not as simple as one might think at first glance. It is not that theology is by nature indefinable, but that the word has actually been used in so many different ways throughout the history of the church, so many different ways, in fact, that one recent theologian, after looking at some of them, just threw up his hands and said, "Theology? That's whatever theologians do." So he tries to define it by its use. We need to admit right up front that there is no one privileged definition of the word 'theology.' It is not a biblical term; it does not appear in the pages of Scripture, and the word is often used without much reflection upon it at all. One popular way to define a word or an idea is to examine it in terms of how it has been used, in terms of the goal toward which it applies.

The first definition is wisdom, or *sapientia*. It was common in the early centuries of the church to think of theology as wisdom, the art or science of knowing God. The emphasis fell not upon cognitive knowledge but personal knowledge or relational knowledge. Augustine is an example. He held that Christianity is not about knowing God abstractly; it is about knowing God personally as our highest good, as a reflection upon and a mediator of the knowledge of God to His people. Theology is about knowing God. This general definition of theology really conformed to the classic Greek use of the word, which is a combination of two terms: *theos* and *logos*. *Logos*: 'the study of' or 'a word about.' *Theos*: 'god', 'a word about god.' But again as the early church tended to use the word 'theology,' the emphasis was not as it had been for the Greeks upon a cognitive, abstract, factual knowledge, but upon a personal relational knowledge. The early church employed the term that we might today call 'spirituality.'

Second, in the centuries after Augustine, it became common to think of theology not in terms of knowing God, but in terms of an organized cognitive body of knowledge. Theology became things to know. Theology was now understood as science, *scientia*. What is the realm of theology? It is Christian doctrine, those things pertaining to God, and man, sin, and redemption, the knowledge of those things which are mediated to us by revelation. The goal of theology then was to know the facts, the truth, about God and about His ways. In effect we are actually much closer to the Greek idea with the second definition of theology as cognitive knowledge.

Around the eighteenth century, however, with the rise of the Enlightenment, a reaction set in against a cognitive definition of theology, and the Enlightenment was reacting to the somewhat speculative tendencies of classical theology; we might say that it was an overreaction. They recognized that medieval scholasticism had made a distinction between theology as 'things to know' on the one side and ethics as 'things we do' on the other. The overreaction was that many people after the time of the Enlightenment came to think of theology as things we do. They simply chose the opposite of what medieval scholasticism had been choosing.

Already with that quick introduction, we see we have three options: theology as spirituality (knowing *who*); theology as thinking right about doctrine (knowing *what* or knowing *that*); and theology as ethics (Christian action, knowing *how*). I want to suggest that reducing theology to any one of these is a mistake. Without a vital relationship to God, knowledge about the facts of God is of no use. James tells us in the second chapter of his epistle that the demons got A's in seminary, but they do not know God. What is the purpose of both the knowledge of God and our relationship to God? That we might be active proponents of His kingdom and active participants in seeking that kingdom. In other words, knowing who, knowing what, and knowing how are all intimately connected, and trying to separate them or identify theology with one of them is purely reductionistic. This is a point I will return to later. Here my intention is really to concentrate on option number two a bit further: theology as cognitive science. I want to do that because that discipline has risen to the top over the last few centuries as the primary definition of theology.

Of all of the uses of the term theology, I think two have risen to preeminence in modern Christendom. Both of them have concentrated on theology as a kind of content, a cognitive deposit of truth of some sort. We might call these, first, the subjectivist understanding; and second, the objectivist understanding of theology. The subjectivist understanding has usually been associated with classical liberalism, and the objective, or objectivist, understanding is representative of the evangelical tradition.

I would like to talk about liberal subjectivism first here. It has been common within the liberal theological tradition to think of theology as a study of the human religious impulse or the human religious consciousness. Thinking of theology simply as a human activity, liberalism has tended to

conceive of theology as being devoid of any objective reference. The object of theological study does not exist outside of man's religious consciousness at all. In other words, theology is not about God or His action; it is about our conception, our sense, of our religious dependence. Thus theological study has no objective reference, certainly no transcendent reference. It is, if you will, a subset of anthropology, psychology, or sociology. The liberal tendency is to reduce theology to the subjective, to purely to human subjectivity, pushing out any objective reality. There is no 'there' out there. It is all in here.

The evangelical tendency—and I count myself an evangelical—lies in the opposite direction, toward pushing out any subjective response, any human response. We have tended to define theology as the divinely-given content of the Christian religion because content is a word about God and it is vouchsafed for us within the pages of Holy Scripture. Thus Geoffrey Bromiley defines theology as “that which is thought and said about God. True theology is thus given by the Bible itself as the revelation of God in human terms.” Now notice in Bromiley's definition that theology equals revelation. You notice that in his second sentence. True theology is given by the Bible itself as the revelation of God in human terms. Thus theology is completely objective, for it is given by God right within the pages of the Bible, and it is not subject to human consciousness at all.

I am going to suggest that both these definitions have problems, both the liberal definition and the evangelical. Each of them is the opposite reduction of the other. The liberal definition is hopelessly relativistic and subjectivistic. While the evangelical definition is more adequate, it is also problematic in its own way, for it confuses theology and revelation. It sees the two as being the same thing and, as such, it always runs the risk of falling into a kind of dogmatism, a kind of hubris. Now evangelicalism wants to do justice to the certainty of faith that God's Word is objectively given and that the Bible stands as God's Word. That, I think, is to be appreciated. It should elicit agreement from every Bible-believing Christian.

The problem is the way in which evangelicalism understands the relationship between God's Word and our study of it. It denies the distinction, forgetting that theology, like any human discipline, is just that—a human discipline, a human act, a human activity. And since it is done by creatures, subjects, it is subjective; it is relative. It is subject to the created order. It is subject to God's norms for thinking. It is relative—related to all these things—related to our faith traditions, related to creaturely rationality. So I am arguing that theology is by its very nature relative and subjective. Human beings never have absolute unconditioned knowledge of anything, even when the thing we are talking about is the absolute Word of God in Scripture. I want to make a distinction: the Word of God is objective; the Word of God is absolute.

Lesslie Newbigin addressed both the subjectivism of liberalism on the one hand and the objectivism of evangelicalism on the other, in *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*:

What seems to have happened in our culture is a falling apart, a disconnection between the subjective and the objective poles. We have on the one hand the ideal, or shall I call it the illusion of a kind of objectivity, which isn't possible, of a kind of knowledge of what we call the facts which involves no personal commitment, no risk of being wrong, something which we have merely to accept without question. And on the other hand, a range of beliefs which are purely subjective, which are, as we say, true for me or what I feel but which are a matter of personal and private choice.

The Bible is the objectively-given revelation of God's will and God's works, but our reflections upon it are never inspired, are never inerrant. They never carry the imprimatur of "Thus sayeth the Lord."

Thus, revelation is God's declaration of His character, ways, and will within creaturely existence. We find this revelation in Scripture (rather, Scripture is one element of this revelation; we'll see later). Theology is a disciplined extra-biblical reflection upon revelation, and the people of God's historic response to revelation. John Jefferson Davis says basically the same thing: "Theology is a form of human reflection, the application of human consciousness to the data of biblical revelation and to earlier ecclesiastical understandings of those data."

We can make this a bit more clear by using an example from another discipline, such as botany. The botanist studies plant life. The tree or shrub that the botanist studies is objectively given. It is a thing, an object, something. But the study of the tree, the discipline of botany, is a human activity and therefore is subjective. It is subject to the tree. The study of the tree, botany, is relative. It is relative to the tree. Botany cannot be confused with trees. The science of botany is a deliberate disciplined study, but it is not a tree.

The discipline of theology can never be confused with God's revelation, which is its primary object of theological study. Theology is always the result of the act of reception and interpretation. It is part of our response to God's Word; it is not God's initiative. In other words, in the final analysis it is not *God* who does theology, it is *humans* who do theology. When we identify our theologies with the very content of revelation, we always run the risk of making our theologies absolute and, quite frankly, turning ourselves off from listening, from hearing. Theology is, as Anselm of Canterbury put it, 'faith seeking understanding.' As such, it is a human cultural enterprise. Theology is not something we find or discover; it is something we do, but it is something we do in response to an objectively given Word.

Now, let me comfort you here, or try to comfort you, by saying one thing further. To say that theology is subjective is not to say that it is subjectivistic. Those are two different words. To say that theology is relative is not to say that it is relativistic. No one, I hope, would claim that the study of botany is relativistic or subjectivistic, for botany is normed, or subject to God's creational laws, His norms for human thinking. And that discipline must do justice to the reality that it bumps up against, the tree. Yet botany is done, again, by human beings as they study and reflect upon the botanical aspect of creation.

In conclusion, what I am arguing here is really two-fold. First of all, the distinction between theology and revelation reminds us of the priority of Scripture over all theological construction. This is nothing less than the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*. All theological expression is accountable to and must be tested by the Word of God. Second, the distinction allows us to be properly humble with our theologies. Theology always has a status that is more tentative and less binding than the revelational certainties that it attempts to explicate. What this means for me is that yes, I am a committed, Reformed, covenantal Calvinist, but I hold that reality a little more loosely than I hold the Word of God. I do not see Calvinism as inspired. I do not hold the Reformed faith as inerrant. I only hold the Bible that way. We need to understand that our theologies, while we always seek to make them faithful to the Word of God, are *our* theologies and, as such, they are subject to all the limitations, errors, misperceptions, and prejudices of all other human endeavors. Thus they must always be open. They must always be held somewhat tentatively.

The need and purpose of theology. One might well ask at this point, "Hey Williams, if there is always a certain subjectivity and provisionality to theological study, why are we bothering? What are we doing sitting here in this room? What good is the whole business? Why don't we just can the whole theological business? The Bible is all we need. It is the sure Word of God."

I would like to address this through a consideration of the purpose of theological study, but in order to do that, I think I should first say something about the content of Scripture. If the Bible is not theology, what is it? This brings us to doctrine and the Christian's faith. As I mentioned in the beginning, the word 'theology' is not in the Bible. The word 'doctrine,' however, and the Greek word is *didache*, does appear in Scripture. It is often translated as 'teaching.' Doctrine, teaching, is the content of the Christian religion. Contrary to what some existentialist approaches to the faith would have us believe, there is no faith without doctrine. Every time we sing a hymn, listen to a sermon, discuss Scripture, recite a creed, we are concerned with doctrine. The Christian faith has discernable contours that differentiate it from any other religious system or philosophical school, and those contours are found in its doctrine. Christians do not put their faith in faith; we put our faith in Jesus. Jesus is the center of our faith. It would of course be correct to say that Jesus is a person, not a doctrine, but when we talk about Jesus, when we assert His importance for us, when we try to explain what He did at Calvary, we are concerned with doctrine, the teaching. Christians regard Jesus as important because the mighty deeds of God came to fulfillment in Him. Christians believe that Jesus is important because we believe He is Emmanuel: God come in the flesh, God come among us as one of us. That is all doctrine. Christian doctrine is nothing less than telling the truth about Jesus. Difficult doctrine does not merely tell us to say 'yes' to Jesus, it also tells us what He has done; it tells us why we should believe, why He is worthy of our belief. The fact is, without a knowledge of His person, without a knowledge of His work, our affirmation of Him is hollow. It's not biblical faith at all then, it is merely sentiment.

The nature of doctrine. It would be too much to say that the Bible is merely a collection of doctrinal statements. However, it is not too much to say that doctrine is fundamental to biblical revelation. As we will discuss later, the Bible is not a loose collection of doctrinal statements; it is rather a narrative. It is a story. It is the grand story of God's relationship with His creation. But there is doctrine and intentional teaching in the Bible as well. Doctrine, as it was understood by the writers of the New Testament, not only included the Gospel, but *was* the Gospel, the Gospel story of Jesus. The Bible is a revelation that functions in terms of a declaration of God's mighty acts, of His deeds, and God's words. Thus we can speak of the Bible as a word and deed revelation. Geerhardus Vos makes the point that the biblical revelation consists of God's actions, which are revelatory, and the explanation of those actions in words, which are revelatory. To state Vos's point more completely, the biblical pattern is really word-deed-word. What we see over and over again in Scripture is, first of all, a word of promise—God tells you what He is going to do. Then an act of fulfillment, God doing what He said He was going to do. Then a word of explanation, which interprets what God just did. And those all go together as the doctrine. Words and deeds, doctrine and events; these cannot be separated from one another. What is the Word, the spoken Word of God? It is a verbalized act. What are the mighty deeds of God? They are the enacted Word of God. I press this a little because it has been the habit in some theological circles to make a distinction between words and deeds, as if the revelation of God is found only in actions (typical of the biblical theology movement of the 1950s), or God's revelation is found only in spoken words (often the case with American fundamentalism). Again, words and deeds cannot be separated.

In fact, the distinction may be somewhat convenient. When we talk about doctrine, such as the doctrine of God, or the doctrine of the atonement, we often hear people refer to the 'idea of God' or the 'idea of the atonement.' I suggest that doctrine is not about ideas. Ideas are constructs in a mind. God is not an idea. What Jesus did at the cross is not an idea. Certainly when we reflect upon God and the cross, we will use mental constructs to do so, but that does not reduce God, Jesus, the cross, or any other reality of the Christian religion to mere ideas. Christianity is not about ideas; it is fundamentally, as we will argue in this course, about persons and events. Paul makes exactly that point in I Corinthians 15: "If Christ is not risen from the grave..."—what? The best translation is, 'Go bowling.' Doctrine, the *didache*, embraces both the story and the explanation of the story. Events naturally call for articulation, an

explanation of their significance. Without that explanation, what we have is brute facts. In the same manner, the cognitive elements of the Christian faith are vacuous without the events that give them life. If the events aren't there, we are not talking about anything. But events are primary. Alister McGrath, in his book, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, says, "The primary reference of Christian doctrine is an historical event not a static timeless concept."

From doctrine to theology. The Bible contains doctrine, but how do we get from doctrine to theology, from the teaching to our reflection upon revelation? And our answer is historical. The early church quite naturally moved toward theological reflection and it did so for a number of good reasons.

Catechetics. Early in the church, the need arose to catechetize new believers, and these new believers were called catechumens. These young people were given instruction in doctrine. This did not merely consist of throwing a Bible at them and saying, "Now you go off and read the Bible." It consisted of teaching them Scripture, but also teaching them the implications of the Word of God for Christian existence and service within the world. After all, the Christian faith is primarily about our living out the faith in such a way that the truth shines in the world, in such a way that we draw others to the faith, in such a way that God's kingdom rule comes to fruition, to manifestation in our lives. And that need for the church, that need for catechism, to instruct people in doctrine so that they then live doctrine is still with us today. Catechism was not just an early church reality; it is the same today as it was in the first century. New converts need instruction in the biblical truth so that they will not be blown about by every wind of doctrine, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4.

But this catechetical function of theology is not limited to the new convert, to young persons. The Bible is a large and diverse revelation and living in its light requires knowledge of its nature, its content, and its intentions. The church saw very early on that a responsible knowledge of Scripture and a responsible knowledge of Christian doctrine require a coherent articulation of that doctrine in the form of declaratory summarization. A good example from the early church would be what was called 'the rule of faith,' a basic statement of the Gospel, codified certainly by the beginning of the third century in the Apostle's Creed. But fact as mere summarization, mere recitation of the story, is not enough. If that is all we have, all we are doing is parroting words; we have not moved toward understanding yet. The Christian faith is never content to rest in ignorance. The Christian faith always wants as far as it is possible to understand, to apply, to contextualize. Who is Jesus? What did He do? Why is that important? The study of theology arose to help give Christians coherent and faithful answers to these questions. In other words, the discipline of theology arose to help us think through our faith.

Eugene Osterhaven says, "We are to love the Lord with our minds as well as our hearts. Through its distinctions and definitions, linguistics and logic, the study of history and hermeneutics, theology helps us to clarify belief. Bearing in mind that Christians are stewards of the mysteries of God, theology seeks to make those mysteries as meaningful as possible to the greater service of God." Now the mysteries of God, which are spoken of in I Corinthians 4:1, are of course centered in Jesus Christ. But they also include such fundamental questions as: Who is the God with whom we have to do? Why are we here? What are we? What is wrong with our world and with our lives? How are we made right? What is a well-lived life? What is the nature of human destiny? What is God doing? And where is He going with history, with creation? Christian theology seeks to tell the truth about those questions so that we can live in the light of that truth. If you think about those questions, not one of them can be answered in a proof-textish kind of way, simply citing one biblical text. You are going to have to think your way through the faith. You are going to have to do some fundamental synthesis. Theological reflection has a positive value in that its primary purpose is to help us think through the faith, to grow our understanding of God's character, His ways, His expectations of His people.

But theology also has an important negative function. As a matter of fact, the birth of theology as an organized discipline took place in the context of the early church's contest with other religions and with heretical understandings of the Christian faith. The first theologians, men like Irenaeus of Lyon and Tertullian of Carthage sought to think through the faith in an organized, comprehensive fashion, especially for the purpose of opposing heresy. The early church's theological opposition to heresy took two different forms: apologetics and polemics. A polemic is an argument against, a refutation of what is considered false. An apologetic is an argument for, or on behalf of, an argument on behalf of what is considered true. Polemics tend to undermine the reasons for certain beliefs by telling why they are false. Apologetics is more positive in that it seeks to tell us why a particular belief is true and why we should believe it.

Again it was ironic that it was in a contest with heresy that the church had to think through its faith. The ancient Gnostics said that Christ was not a man; He was merely a ghost. If Gnostics are not right, who is? It was in that context of refuting the Gnostic heresy and defending the truth that theology arose. While false understandings of Jesus Christ and His redemption should never be welcomed in the Church, they have had the historical effects of forcing the church to articulate itself, to think through its faith, clearly and comprehensively.

Correcting our misperceptions. Each of us is prone to error. I know I am. Naturally—I guess I should say unnaturally because it comes from the fall—naturally I really do not want to hear the Word of God. I tend to replace God's Word with my word. Simply quoting Scripture will not always bring the truth home to me. I hear the words, but I put in the meanings I would like to have. Maybe you are the same way. The discipline and discernment, however, of the theological tasks help me to test the spirit, help me to be critical of what I would like to hear, and to be more realistic with what is actually there. Thus Paul reminded Titus that leaders of the churches must be able to both give instruction in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict it (Titus 1:9) and I think we need to apply that to ourselves personally as well.

The goal of theological study. Theology is a disciplined study which seeks to proclaim the Christian faith. It is the study that proclaims the faith. I am a systematic theologian, which means I get paid for being a professor. The very meaning of that word comes to its fullest meaning in what I do for a living. I get to profess Christ. Theology is a disciplined study which seeks to proclaim the Christian faith by focusing upon God's revelation and the Church's historic response to that revelation. It does all of that in a coherent, comprehensive, and timely manner. Good theology proclaims the truth about Jesus.

But it also explores the significance of that truth for our lives. Theology asks such questions as: What are the implications of the doctrine of the trinity for the way we pray? What does the affirmation of Jesus' full humanity have to do with the way I conduct myself on Monday morning in the work place? Or to put it in terms of questions that are going to become very important for us later on in the semester: What relationship is there between the way the Bible depicts God and the biblical commandment that we tell others about Jesus? There is a connection. Does it really matter if I think of God as personal or not? Does it really matter if I think of God as He, She, or It?

You recall from the beginning of the lecture that historically, early on in the church, there were three definitions, three goals, for theology: wisdom, knowledge, ethics—intimacy with God, knowledge of God, and right action in the world. Scripture actually gets at all of those when it talks about knowing. Knowing, in its truest, fullest, biblical sense, is all of that. To know God is to know things about Him. To know God is to know Him personally. To know God is to obey Him. And it cannot ever be

separated. I think it is unfortunate that theology has been narrowed to the purely cognitive, the purely dispersive. It is almost as if we would like to think that spirituality and ethics can be done in a theology-free zone, as if knowing God is unrelated to knowing the facts about God. Can I say I know my wife if I cannot tell you her birthday, or what color her eyes are, if I cannot pick her out of a crowd? Can we say we know Jesus if we cannot differentiate between Him and Mao, or anyone else? So, all three of these are quintessential to both knowing and theology.

Theology has, then, the goal of biblical knowing. It also seeks to defend the faith, by articulating how it is true, and to refute the challenges to it. So the goals of theology are knowing, defending, and refuting. Next we will look at objections to the discipline of theology.