

# WHAT IS THEOLOGY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”(Jn 14:6). This brief statement, so familiar to us all, is currently the cause of much dispute between Christians and members of other faiths, and indeed within the Church itself. To some it seems arrogant, intolerant and insensitive. Yet it is of the essence of our faith, an essential building block of our theology. In our multi-faith, pluralistic society our historic orthodox theology is currently being questioned, if not attacked, from both outside and inside our churches and institutions.

Indeed, many of you have been asking “Just what is theology, and why is it important to me?” Since I am currently studying it in seminary, the Rector has asked me to preach about these questions this morning.

We all do have some idea of what we think Theology is. To many of us, I am sure ... and certainly it was so for me ... theology appears to be some esoteric, highly abstract academic discipline dealing with such earth-shattering issues as how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. It does not appear to do very much that is useful. Indeed, arguments have been made that the only thing it does is provide employment for a number of university professors ... that it is not necessary or relevant. After all, one can be a Christian without it since it is not necessary for salvation. In addition to this objection, Owen Thomas in his book “Introduction to Theology” – a text used in Episcopal seminaries – lists a number of others. Theology, it has been said:

- Moves away from the directness and simplicity of faith
- Gets lost in subtle distinctions, arid definitions, abstract conceptions and hair-splitting analysis.
- Makes true doctrine the object of faith rather than God, and
- Arouses controversies that divide the church.

In recent times, the views of Bishop Spong, and those of the members of the Jesus Seminar, would certainly seem to fit these descriptions.

Moreover, the Bible contains little if any “theology”, and the Gospel calls us to active love and faithful obedience rather than intellectual reflection. The question many have been asking, then, is why is it necessary? The short answer is because if you don’t know where you are going, any road will take you there. Let me expand on this by defining Theology and explaining what it actually does for and in the Church. Before I do, let me make the observation that it is not just the meal ticket for various and sundry academics. Rather, it is something we all do. Let me explain:

If someone were to ask you what you believe about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit or salvation the chances are you would answer their questions. In doing so you would be stating your theology. All of us are, at some level, theologians. There are certainly professional theologians, who spend their lives thinking and teaching about theology, but it is not just for schools and seminaries; it is for life. It is for each of us as members of Christ’s body, the Church.

Since we are living in a culture where – increasingly – “anything goes”, distinctive statements about our theology are increasingly necessary. Most people are willing to accept us as Christians if our beliefs are not narrow – if we are willing, for example, to state that Christianity is one of many legitimate paths to salvation – but if we state that the gospel is the only path to salvation we may be labeled as narrow-minded bigots. The exclusive claims of Christianity (i.e.: that Jesus is the only way to God) don’t fit within the currently pervasive worldview that attempts to reject absolutes.

It does matter what we believe. Our beliefs are the framework around which faith gets built. For a New Ager, on the other hand, truth is relative. You believe what’s right for you and I’ll believe what’s right for me and it will all work out in the end. However, in the absence of absolutes we can wander dangerously in and out of varying belief systems like a rudderless boat on a stormy ocean. That’s why so many in the New Age ‘move on’ with regularity. The thing they were into wasn’t really ‘it’ after all.

The reality is that we can’t simply agree to disagree because we are all right. We aren’t. We cannot be. Most of the major world religions are mutually exclusive. It is not intolerant to have strong beliefs. It is intolerant to refuse to allow others to hold strong beliefs that are different from ours.

Our beliefs are our foundation for faith. If we are staking our eternity on what we believe it's important to know that we are on the right track. That is what Theology is all about.

Theology has been described by St. Anselm of Canterbury as "faith seeking understanding". It has been defined as the study of God and of the relations between God and the universe. It is about how I approach God, and what I approach him with. I am a factor in my own theology and cannot remove myself from it.

From the time we are born we learn by testing our environment. It is the same with theology. We cannot love God with all we have unless we think, question, wonder, wrestle and otherwise use our minds and imaginations to explore who our Creator is and who we are in relation to our Creator. We do theology because we are made to do theology. It is the human condition to be curious – about our world and about our Creator. It is essential to better understand our faith in order to better share it.

Theology is concerned not only with the nature and attributes of God, but also with such subjects as the Bible, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, man, salvation, angels, the Church and the end times. It is itself, however, not the focus. Just as a telescope focuses on the moon, theology focuses on God. Just as the telescope does not contain the moon, theology does not contain or limit God.

It is critically important to determine what is essential to the Christian faith and message, and what is not essential; what is central and what is peripheral; and to resolve misunderstandings by distinguishing true doctrine from false.

Systematic theology is the methodical investigation and interpretation of the content of Christian faith. We call it "systematic" in the sense of gathering up and organizing the doctrines and concepts that give context to our faith. It is the orderly clarification and explanation of what is affirmed in the Christian message, carried out by members of the church. It strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of Christian faith, based primarily on the scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom and related to the issues of life. It is church reflecting on the basis and content of its message. It must do so in every age so it can interpret and present it in a way that can be understood and affirmed in each new period.

Theology is based primarily on scripture in that it takes as the primary source of its content the canonical scriptures, together with insights of other areas of truth regarded as God's general revelation. It is placed in the context of culture in general in that it attempts to relate its view of man's origins to the concepts advanced by science; its view of human nature to psychology's understanding of personality; its conception of providence to the work of the philosophy of history. It is worded in a contemporary idiom in that while treating timeless issues, it must do so in language, concepts and thought forms that make sense in the present time. It is related to the issues of life in that it is to be practical in terms of answering our questions about God and the Creation; things like:

- What is implied when the Bible states humans are made in God's image
- Is the Holy Spirit a person or a thing?
- If I accept Christ's sacrificial death for me can my salvation be taken away?
- Was Jesus literally resurrected from the dead?
- What is man's nature?
- Do angels really exist?
- Is the church a building?
- Where is God in a world full of war, suffering and disease?

The task of theology is to regularly test, criticize and revise the language the Church uses about God, in order to keep it fresh and maintain continuity of meaning. Without revision the Church's language can fall into error and confusion as the language of contemporary culture changes and evolves.

The Bible as the main source and standard of Christian teaching is not uniform. It contains no simple unity of teaching, but a multiplicity of different approaches – a different view of Jesus, for example, is presented in each of the four Gospels. These differences must be resolved by critical reflection and theological work. In addition, the thought categories of the Bible must be translated into contemporary ones. Since language, concepts, issues and questions about faith change from age to age we cannot present Biblical truths from a first century perspective. We must translate it for current consumption. The science, geology, biology and historiography of the Bible have no authority for us today, and must be distinguished from its faith testimony.

Theology, in its larger task, is concerned to interpret all areas of human experience, including science, in the light of biblical revelation; to understand and interpret what God has done in the story of the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Church and mankind. It seeks to interpret the data of human experience in the light of God. In contemporary parlance, it is a World View.

Theology helps believers describe, explain and account for their faith; and to state it to themselves and to others. It is not meant to build a barrier of words against God revealed in Jesus Christ. Rather, its intention is to support faith and save it from lapsing into mindless piety, bizarre enthusiasm, sick superstition or blind dogmatism. Its role is to interpret the faith expressed in the Bible, Credal Statements, and the various seminal Councils of the Church – Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon – in the language that we, today, can understand.

The role of academic theologians is to reflect on the behalf of the community of the Church:

- To clarify obscurities
- To renew dead language
- To offer fresh insights, and
- To scrutinize current developments in Christian theory and practice.

Today, Theology is carried on with an ecumenical perspective, as a result of the work of The World Council of Churches and The Second Vatican Council.

Theology has four major categories:

- Biblical – The expounding of meaning of Bible in its parts and as a whole. It is the foundation of church's preaching, teaching, worship and action.
- Historical – The study of how the church has interpreted the Bible and Christian faith; and how it has lived them out in various historical periods
- Systematic – The explanation of the content of the Christian faith. It includes testing the church's language about God in the light of its norm, apologetics – the defence of the Church to its critics – and ethics.
- Practical – The study of the norms, principles and practices of the church and its members. It begins with the doctrine of the Church, and asks what the

church must do to fulfill its being - what is essential and necessary and what is expedient. It includes homiletics, liturgics, education, and pastoral care.

The first purpose of Theology was – and is - dealing with distortions of the Christian faith, both from within church and attacks from outside. For example, the Gnostics were refuted by Irenaeus, the pagan Middle Platonist Celsus was answered by Origen, and the various councils of the Church have resulted in our Credal statements – the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Creed of St. Athanasius – the Canon or contents of our Holy Scripture; our acceptance of Mary as the Mother of God; and our belief that Jesus Christ is both fully human and completely divine, of one being with the Father.

The second purpose of theology is the doctrinal instruction of new members - Baptismal and catechetical instruction and the training of teachers.

The third purpose is the summary and development of the fundamental ideas of the Bible.

The type of theological reflection most of us will be required to do is not about development of a system; but rather resolving specific issues and problems:

- Issues confronting Christians in our life and work
- Issues confronting the church at large in its communal life and in relation to the world
- The personal issue of understanding, affirming, doubting, or denying some element in Christian faith.

A theological question is simply one that involves a judgement about God, or the relation of God to the world:

- Involving the understanding or interpretation of some element in Christian faith, or
- Involving a decision whether some assertion is a valid part of the Christian faith
- That inquires about God, or the world ( or part of it) in relation to God

Theology does not end with the study of God and God's relation to the world. It is not a subject to be embraced only by the clergy, monk or seminary student. It is shared by everyone. It is as unique as the experiencing of it. It causes us to get up in the

morning, go about our day and enter into the relationships we have .It is not just about what we think; it is what we do and how we live – not only in public but also in the secret places of our homes. (As the Apostle James said, a person who claims to have faith in Christ but does not show forth-good works is but carrying the carcass of the faith. (James 2).

Theology is not merely considering abstract constructions to build definitions and propositions regarding the nature of God. It is where my encounter with God through the Holy Spirit bringing faith in Jesus Christ is explored, prayed about, sung about, sought in worship and found in greater and greater depth. It is the way we speak to each other about the God in Christ we have with us in and through the Holy Spirit. It is something that is done as the natural extension of the Christian life. Whenever we gather in communities of faith we are exercising our theology.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen