

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY

Definition of theology

θεός *theos*, “God”

λόγος *logos*, “word, study, science”

thus, “the science or study of God”

Augustine: theology is “rational discussion respecting the deity”

Charles Hodge: “science of the facts of divine revelation”

Louis Berkhof: the “systematized knowledge of God in his various relations to the universe. . . . Theology is the effect which the divine revelation, embodied in Scripture, produces in the sphere of systematic thought. Theology is the fruit of the reflection of the church on the truth revealed in the Word of God.”

some questions regarding the definition of theology:

1) Is theology a science?

science being understood as the study of reality based on observation, theorizing, and experimentation

Science bases its knowledge on the ability of man to perform these tasks “objectively”; it does not deal with non-physical or spiritual reality; it does not accept a prior revelation from God as the basis of knowledge.

2) What part does reason play in theology?

Christian theology bases its findings on revealed material (i.e., the Bible); it pursues its object by both “scientific” (inductive study) and “non-scientific” methods (prayer, Christian experience, etc.).

3) Does theology yield absolute truth?

Can infallible divine revelation plus fallible human reason yield absolute truth?

4) Must the results of theology be refined from time to time?

While the original revelation of God is complete, our understanding of it develops over time, with greater study and experience.

Famous phrase: “Reformed, but always reforming”

Sources of theology

Theologians have found several sources from which to develop their ideas of God:

Reason

(defined narrowly, as logical deduction from stated premises, or broadly, including also one’s feelings, intuition, experience)

This position says that one can find his way to God by this own thought, reasoning, contemplation, etc. An example would be St. Anselm, who developed the ontological argument for the existence of God.

Another group would seek confirmation for God and his attributes in human experience, especially religious experience (cf. neo-orthodoxy).

Church authority

Many groups (such as the Roman Catholic Church) teach that God reveals his truth to the church in some collective way, or directly to the leaders of the church. After some time, these teachings become even stronger by the force of tradition.

General revelation

Some say that much of God's person and character is revealed in nature, so that, by contemplating nature, man is able to have a true knowledge of God. The evidentialist apologists of England provide an example.

Special revelation

The Bible claims to be a direct revelation to man from God. Christian belief in the Bible requires us to find and systematize the teachings found there.

Postmodern theology's sources of theology

Postmodern "evangelical" theology sees three sources for theology: special revelation (Scripture), tradition, and the culture. Such is theology is worked out by Stanley J. Grenz in his *Theology for the Community of God* (2000).

Dogmatic approach to theology

One way to study theology is to study the various creeds of the churches. This is called the dogmatic approach.

Theological study and conflict in the church have produced a series of creeds, which reflect the growth in understanding of the church in particular areas.

Creeds are the fruit of reflection by the church (not just individuals) on the truths revealed in the Bible. They are officially adopted by a competent ecclesiastical body, and have authority in the circle wherein they are recognized. This sets them apart from statements by individuals.

For an excellent collection and explanation of these creeds, see Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (3 vol.). James Dennison has begun a three-volume series on the Reformed creeds in particular; so far the first volume has appeared: *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: 1523-1552* (2008).

Creeds of the ancient church

Apostles' Creed. —start in second century; present form in sixth century

Nicene Creed. —formulated in A.D. 325 at the council at Nicea; emphasizes deity and eternity of God the Son; Constantinopolitan form of the Nicene Creed (381) added person and work of Holy Spirit; Latin form added *filioque* (Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son) at council of Toledo (589)

Athanasian Creed. —written over fifth to eighth centuries, named after Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (328-373)

Chalcedonian Creed. — (431); most precise for the person of Christ; two natures, without mixture, change, division, or separation

Creeds of the Roman Catholic Church

(accepts all ancient creeds, and the first eight ecumenical councils)

Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent. — (1545-63); called to counteract against Protestantism

Creed of Pius IV, "Profession of Faith of Trent". —papal bull of Pius IV (1564); all teachers, ecclesiastics, converts from Protestantism had to subscribe to it

Roman Catechism. —produced by Pope Pius V (1566); explains and enforces Canons of Trent

Decrees of the Vatican Council. — (1869-70); strengthened position of papacy, infallibility of the pope; confirmed doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception (1854)

Decrees of Vatican II. — (1963-65); assumption of Mary; liberalized church teaching in many areas

Roman Catholic Catechism.—(1994); large work, incorporates liberalized teachings of Vatican II, yet still asserts traditional distinctives

Creeds of the Greek Church

(Division from the western church, A.D. 1054; recognizes the first seven ecumenical councils)

Orthodox Confession of the Catholic and Apostolic Greek Church. — (1643)

Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem (or Confession of Dositheus). — (1672)

Longer Catechism of Philaret. — (Russian catechism; 1839)

Creeds of the Lutheran church

(accept Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian, Chalcedonian)

Larger and Smaller Catechisms. — (by Luther; 1529)

Augsburg Confession. — (by Luther and Melancthon; 1530; oldest Protestant confession, the only universally accepted Lutheran standard)

Apology of the Augsburg Confession. — (by Melancthon; 1537)

Articles of Smachald. — (by Luther; 1537)

Formula of Concord. — (1577; hardened Lutheran positions on grace and free will and on the Lord's Supper)

Creeds of Reformed Churches

(Reformed churches accept same ancient creeds as the Lutheran churches.)

Confessio Tetrapolitana.—(oldest Reformed creed; 1530; “four cities”; presented at same diet as the Augsburg Confession by Martin Bucer; differed in sacraments; same four cities adopted Augsburg Confession in 1532)

Belgic Confession.—(composed by Guido de Bräs, a Reformed preacher in the Netherlands, in 1561; revised by a Reformed synod in Antwerp in 1566 and further revised by the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619)

[The following description of the Belgic Confession is found on many Reformed websites. This one is copied from the reformed.org website.]

THE oldest of the doctrinal standards of the Christian Reformed Church is the Confession of Faith, popularly known as the Belgic Confession, following the seventeenth-century Latin designation "Confessio Belgica." "Belgica" referred to the whole of the Netherlands, both north and south, which today is divided into the Netherlands and Belgium. The confession's chief author was Guido de Bräs, a preacher of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, who died a martyr to the faith in the year 1567.

During the sixteenth century the churches in this country were exposed to the most terrible persecution by the Roman Catholic government. To protest against this cruel oppression, and to prove to the persecutors that the adherents of the Reformed faith were not rebels, as was laid to their charge, but law-abiding citizens who professed the true Christian doctrine according to the Holy Scriptures, de Bräs prepared this confession in the year 1561. In the following year a copy was sent to King Philip II, together with an address in which the petitioners declared that they were ready to obey the government in all lawful things, but that they would "offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire," rather than deny the truth expressed in this confession. Although the immediate purpose of securing freedom from

persecution was not attained, and de Bräs himself fell as one of the many thousands who sealed their faith with their lives, his work has endured and will continue to endure. In its composition the author availed himself to some extent of a confession of the Reformed churches in France, written chiefly by John Calvin, published two years earlier.

The work of de Bräs, however, is not a mere revision of Calvin's work, but an independent composition. In 1566 the text of this confession was revised at a synod held at Antwerp. In the Netherlands it was at once gladly received by the churches, and it was adopted by national synods held during the last three decades of the sixteenth century. The text, not the contents, was revised again at the Synod of Dort in 1618-19 and adopted as one of the doctrinal standards to which all officebearers in the Reformed churches were required to subscribe. The confession stands as one of the best symbolical statements of Reformed doctrine. The translation presented here is based on the French text of 1619.

Heidelberg Catechism.—(1562; by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus; for German Dutch churches; approved by Synod of Dort; used in Scotland before the Westminster standards were adopted)

Thirty-nine Articles.—(Archbishop Cramner had prepared 42 articles for the Church of England in 1552; revised to 39 in 1563; later reduced to 25, and adopted by Methodist Episcopal Church in the USA)

Second Helvetic Confession.—(1566; by Bullinger; Reformed churches in Switzerland, Poland, Hungary, Scotland, France)

Canons of the Synod of Dort.—(1618-19; specific response to errors of Arminianism)

Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism, Shorter Catechism.—(produced by the Westminster Assembly, 1643-49; used by Reformed churches of England and Scotland; many congregational confessions derived from these in England and America: *Savoy Declaration*, 1658 in London; *Cambridge Platform*, 1648 in Massachusetts; *Boston Confession*, 1680; *Saybrook Platform*, 1708 in Connecticut; *Philadelphia Confession*, Baptist confession in 1780)

The existence of these creeds shows the tremendous importance that theological formulations has had on the history of the church. At the same time, their limited number reveals the relative unity of doctrine of the church as a whole, in spite of important differences. Of course, the study of these creeds would include study of the writings of the people who produced them.

Other approaches to theology

It is also fruitful to study the history of the development of doctrine. (e.g., Reinhold Seeberg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrine*). A danger of this approach is the idea that theology is time-bound. An example of this thinking is found in the *Confession of 1967* of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA. This confession emphasizes various societal issues which were current in the 1960's, and deemphasizes many of the timeless truths of Christianity.

Others try the philosophical approach to theology. By adapting Christian teaching to prevailing philosophical trends, these theologians radically change the message of the Bible. Examples include the old Liberal theology (“the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man”); the neo-orthodox theology (existentialism applied to Christianity); the “God is dead” theology (a secular approach); liberation theology (Marxism made Christian); and modern feminist theology.

Exegetical-systematic approach to theology

This is the recommended approach, although the other approaches have valuable contributions to make if used properly. Exegetical theology bases its understanding on one or more Scriptures without any attempt to systematize those truths. Biblical theology traces the development of various themes throughout the Bible. Systematic theology then attempts to arrange and organize the truths gained from exegesis into a comprehensive system. It contributes to theology by eliminating contradictions and producing a hierarchy of truths showing their relative importance.

Divisions of systematic theology

There are many ways to organize the great field of theology. The following are the divisions used by most theologies:

- 1) Theology proper (doctrine of God, the Trinity)
- 2) Revelation (general and special)
- 3) Creation, Providence
- 4) Anthropology (man)
- 5) Hamartiology (sin)
- 6) Soteriology (salvation)

- 7) Ecclesiology (the church)
- 8) Eschatology (last things)
- 9) Ethics
- 10) Apologetics

Necessity of theological study

develop our mind in image of God

know and appreciate God's revelation

know God better

arrange doctrine for Christian fellowship

recognize heresy

use in popular instruction

Benefits of theology for exegesis

Just as theology is dependent on exegesis, so it helps exegesis. Our interpretation of a particular passage may be modified by the knowledge of a theological truth based on other passages. This has been called the analogy of faith.

example: prayer related to the will of God

example: faith, hope, and love, related to the will of God

faith - will of God = presumption

hope - will of God = empty speculation

love - will of God = sentimentalism or indulgence