

SOUND WORDS

HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS—2 TIMOTHY 1:13

First Partaker

Theology Matters

I may not even know what a “theology” is, but I can’t avoid having one. That’s because “theo-logy” is a “word” (*logos*) about “God” (*theos*), and everyone, even an atheist, has something that he believes and says about God. He has a theology.

Why Theology Matters

Theology matters, therefore, in the first place, because it’s about God. Since nothing matters more than He does, it follows that theology matters infinitely.

Theology matters, secondly, because it’s about the whole Bible. That’s announced by its first words, “In the beginning God . . .” Since everything after that is His story, to study anything the Bible says is to study theology, the story of God’s being, thinking, and ways. Hence multivolume works called “theologies” systematize not just what Scripture teaches about the doctrine of God proper, but about every other doctrine as well. All of it is God’s thinking and therefore “theology.”

Thirdly, theology matters because it rules over all. At the end of the day, whatever people really believe about God decides everything—their values and morals, their use of time, possessions and abilities, their relations to all other beings, circumstances and events (including their heroes and villains), where and how they work, whom they marry (and whether they stay married), for whom and what they vote, how they react to trouble or loss, and what they feel and say when dying. You name it, in the end, it all comes down to their theology. “The fear of the Lord [a theology] is the beginning of wisdom.” About what? About everything! Both in this life

and the next (read Proverbs). On the other hand, “The _____ of the Lord [fill in the blank with any rival theology you wish] is the beginning” of all things. No one can escape the comprehensive consequences of the theology with which he begins and negotiates life.

All people at all times in all things are ruled by their theology. That is, people *practice* their theology. Theology, therefore, is practical for all of life, not merely theoretical in books and classrooms only. I’m not arguing, of course, that any of us always acts consistently with what we believe. We all recognize that that’s not the case. But that very recognition is itself one of the surest proofs that a governing theology exists in our hearts. Otherwise we wouldn’t instinctively feel that certain things are out of character for us. Our governing theology pronounces them so, thus persisting in its reign regardless of our resistance.

To summarize, theology matters because it’s about God, Scripture, and life. Since there are no more important, no more universally comprehensive studies than these three, and because it is theology which governs our every belief and action regarding these, a rigorously right theology is the ultimate good which can be acquired. To know God truthfully, to understand the Scripture comprehensively, and to live life rightly is the greatest conceivable human blessing.

On the other hand, no greater disaster for a human being can be conceived than to live and die with an untruthful theology. Not knowing God as He actually is, not understanding what the Scripture definitely teaches, not living in this world and the next as they really are is the ultimate catastrophe.

No one therefore, least of all faithful preachers, can safely dismiss theology or its attendant issues. We, more than any class of men on earth, are by virtue of our calling required to be theologians of the first rank. Our

*“The husbandman that laboreth must be first partaker of the fruits”
(2 Tim. 2:6)*

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responsibility for this surpasses that of even the formal class of teachers professionally called “theologians.” They’re called to be masters in narrowly circumscribed spheres. Though this ministry is critical to the health of the Church, it is by its very nature a role specialized and therefore confined and repetitive.

But we preachers are called upon to minister not merely the next semester’s subject matter, but the whole counsel of God. Our preaching must range over the entire landscape of Scripture. It must do it for the sake of every class among the people of God. For children and for teens and adults. For men and for women. For church leaders and for new converts. For young couples

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grieving over their first miscarriage, for middle-aged widows caring for aged parents in the last stages of Alzheimer’s disease, for elderly couples when one partner is stone blind and the other is a helpless invalid. To all of these we minister theology in public and in private, in the pulpit and in the counselor’s chair, at the hospital bed and by the graveside.

God, Scripture, life—these are the domains of theology. All conceivable sorts of believers and unbelievers—these are the learners of theology. And preachers are its foremost teachers. No wonder the New Testament speaks so frequently and forcefully to preachers about it.

- 1 Timothy 4:6—“a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words . . . of good doctrine.”
- 1 Timothy 4:13—“give attendance to . . . doctrine.”
- 1 Timothy 4:16—“take heed . . . unto the doctrine.”
- 1 Timothy 5:17—“they who labour in . . . doctrine.”

- 2 Timothy 3:16—“all scripture . . . is profitable for doctrine.”
- 2 Timothy 4:2—“exhort with . . . doctrine.”
- Titus 1:9—“able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.”
- Titus 2:1—“speak thou the things which become sound doctrine.”
- Titus 2:7—“in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity.”

How to Check Our Theology

Given the magnitude of our theological ministry, we preachers must willingly submit our teaching to a rigorous Scriptural scrutiny. Not that we turn our people into critics, but that we be ourselves Bereans. To evaluate ourselves objectively, however, we’re going to have to abandon what are far too frequently the most widely used tests, or at least acknowledge their limitations.

My family lived for the better part of one school year with my mother’s parents in a little farming community in Kansas. Never before or after did we eat so well. Since my grandfather owned the local grocery store, he brought home the best cuts of meat. Pork and beef especially. Lots of it. We ate like kings. Everyone was full, happy, and returned every day for every meal. There was no table like grandma’s. Especially for fried meats.

I loved my grandmother for her cooking, but today, from the vantage of a daily fight with middle-aged mortality, I cringe at the fats and grease on which we binged then. Our diet must have been practically suicidal. My grandmother, in fact, was alarmingly overweight and died relatively young. Though my grandfather lived long, various abdominal disorders plagued him for decades.

It’s apparent to me from personal experience that the fact that someone is a popular cook doesn’t necessarily mean she’s a safe dietician. The very opposite may be the case.

Preachers, too, must genuinely, humbly, *accept* that visible results, large crowds, or even a full outside speaking itinerary don’t necessarily mean that we’re always safe theologians. Those aren’t very good tests (as we all caution regarding wildly popular Evangelical or Charismatic leaders). What are?

The first test of our dogma (great word!) must be that of theological category. We must judge whether preaching (counseling, writing, etc.) falls into the category of what theologians call *Biblical* theology or what they term *systematic* theology. We all have systems of theology, be they denominational, soteriological, eschatological, or whatever. We assume that our systems are at the same time Biblical. In other words, we presume that our systematic theology is, in fact, Biblical theology. But it’s critical that we continually test that assumption. Here’s how.

The simplest example of citing strictly Biblical theology is when a child confidently sings, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” The Bible *tells* me so. That’s Biblical theology. It’s whatever the Bible says

clearly, expressly, and unmistakably. “God is love.” “God so loved the world.” “The Son of God loved me.” These and similar statements are the Bible’s theology of God’s love. It’s entirely safe to preach them dogmatically.

But let’s proceed. Let’s say we’d like to know not just part but the entirety of the Bible’s theology about some subject. That requires gathering every single statement it makes about that topic.

For instance, in the 1980s most of us were compelled to educate our people about Charismatism. I decided to preach a series on spiritual gifts. I ransacked the Scripture for references to the Holy Spirit until I had compiled an exhaustive list of every single thing I could find that the Bible explicitly said about Him. This was doing purely Biblical theology. I could have preached through that list dogmatically, confident that my theology was entirely Biblical. No Bible believer could have argued with my theology legitimately. It was all strictly Biblical.

But a list like that has limitations. For one thing, the material isn’t usefully categorized. The mind needs compartments, like those in a fisherman’s tackle box, into which to sort various kinds of scriptural statements about a subject. So we find ourselves making lists (compartments) labeled, “The Identity of the Holy Spirit,” or “The Relationship of the Holy Spirit to the World,” or “The Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” and so on. Now we’re systematizing. We’re gradually transitioning from a strictly Biblical theology to one that requires additional conclusions (these compartments) formulated by our own minds.

As long as these compartments are unarguably Scriptural they’re still a refined form of Biblical theology even though we’ve begun systematizing. But let’s say the compartments call for even further subdividing. Maybe they’re still too big and unwieldy, like the category about God called “Attributes.” Try taking your people through that without subcategorizing!

So we hunt for ways to categorize even further. In the case of my study on the Spirit, for example, I discovered that I was looking at nineteen separate gifts (maybe even twenty if I counted celibacy in 1 Cor. 7:7). So I inserted a little partition into the compartment called “His Gifts.” Now I had two small cubicles instead of one large one. One of these small ones I labeled “His Permanent Gifts,” the other I labeled “His Temporary Gifts.”

Sometimes this kind of subcategorizing is still entirely safe. That’s because, again, the smaller divisions are either expressed or implied by Scripture itself or else they’re so general that there’s really no Scriptural reason for rejecting them. In other words, my systematic theology is still pretty undeniably Biblical theology.

But in this case I’d systematized to the point where I knew I was going to spark controversy with some Bible believers. They would point out that the Bible itself didn’t actually say that some of the Spirit’s gifts are temporary. In other words, that I had no Biblical

theology for that subcategory. They would dismiss it by saying, “That’s just his system,” or “He has no Bible for that.” Well? Did I?

That’s the really critical question at any point in developing theology where we encounter the objection of other Bible believers. Are they overlooking some of the Bible’s explicit theology? Or am I inserting into the theological box something systematic that the Bible doesn’t actually teach?

No pastor can afford, now or eternally, to be careless about this. We’re the world’s foremost theologians. We must—we must—test our teaching by these theological categories (Biblical and systematic), especially if what we’re teaching arouses the suspicions or outright objections of other Bible believers.

Testing this out is absolutely fundamental to staying sound and avoiding unnecessary controversy. No pastor can afford, now or eternally, to be careless about this. We’re the world’s foremost theologians. We must—we must—test our teaching by these theological categories (Biblical and systematic), especially if what we’re teaching arouses the suspicions or outright objections of other Bible believers. The more sound these believers are, the more cautious I should be before digging a foxhole to defend my position.

If I can show the objectors that they’re missing something the Bible actually says, that ought to settle the argument—provided, of course, that we agree on definitions. Word meanings are a second critical test of a theology, but more on that later. On the other hand, if the objectors are right, that the Bible doesn’t dogmatically state what I’m teaching, then my subcategory may not be theologically safe. Yet . . . it may. Let me illustrate.

I had to agree with Charismatics that I couldn’t say, “Gifts have ceased, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” I take that back, I could say it. In fact, I probably had said it. But now I knew that I couldn’t say it truthfully. I couldn’t say it from a strictly Biblical theological standpoint. It wasn’t actually Biblical theology.

There were, however, certain Bible statements that led me to the *logical* conclusion that miraculous gifts have, in fact, ceased. Passages such as Paul’s description of the “signs of an apostle,” for instance (2 Cor. 12:12). After carefully studying these, I came to believe that they almost certainly led inductively to the conclusion that some of the gifts were temporary. But, someone objects immediately, isn’t it dangerous to develop theology by logic? It can be.

The most conspicuous examples of the fact that reasoning may be terribly wrong-headed are the fourteen instances in which Paul reacts against a perfectly logical conclusion with a horrified, "God forbid!" ("May it never be!"). It's true, he teaches, that wherever sin has abounded grace can super-abound. But "may it never be" that you should take the logical step of concluding that we might as well live in sin so that God's grace can abound even more (Romans 5:20–6:2). Again, it's true that the nation Israel lies under the judgment of God and that He's offering His salvation to the Gentiles. But "may it never be" that we should conclude that God has totally and finally cast away the Jew (Rom. 11:1ff).

In spite of this danger, Scripture itself teaches the legitimacy of logical, theological reasoning. Our Lord was using it when arguing for bodily resurrection (Matt. 22:32). He reasoned with the Sadducees from the Divine assurance to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (cf. Exod. 3:6). Obviously, there's no explicit affirmation of resurrection in that statement, but what is its implication? That the Patriarchs were still living since "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." When Christ reasoned this way, He was going beyond strict Biblical theology into the realm of logical reasoning. He could, of course, have answered entirely as a Biblical theologian because there are explicit Bible statements affirming bodily resurrection. My point is simply that, for whatever reason, He chose on this occasion to reason logically.

So it's apparent from the Bible itself that systematic theology may appropriately refine and advance Biblical theology through the use of logic. To the extent that it does so with strict Scriptural accuracy the system can in turn be properly called "Biblical." Nevertheless it's crucial to recognize that there's a difference between express Bible statement and additional logical conclusion. Whatever the Bible says is so. Whatever logic concludes may or may not be so.

In the case of spiritual gifts, therefore, I concluded that the little "temporary gifts" compartment in my theological tackle box was justifiable. Not, of course, to the same degree that the larger ones labeled "Jesus' Deity" or "Blood Atonement" are. But nevertheless it was, to my mind, defensible. Yet integrity would now compel me to acknowledge that it hadn't been constructed on the basis of a precisely Biblical theology. It was more systematic in its nature.

The value of differentiating these two categories of theology is almost self-apparent. The categories sort out


what we can be most dogmatic about from, on the other hand, what we might be free to agree to disagree about. G. Campbell Morgan had a happy way of tipping his people off to the latter. When he came to the parts of his sermon that were very much his own systematic conclusions he would say, "Now put your pens down. What I'm going to say next is sanctified speculation."

That's not a bad approach to use, even if nowhere else but in the privacy of our study. Go ahead, italicize, underscore, highlight and print in bold what the Bible actually says. No problem! But when, by deduction or induction, we've systematized a step beyond its explicit statements, we ought to at least back off the "bold." When we've systemized even further, we probably ought to eliminate the highlight as well. And at some point some parts of the system need to be written in smaller point type, or even punctuated with a "?" rather than a ".".

Before leaving this first important test of our theology—namely, its category (Biblical or systematic)—I'd like to suggest that it might be helpful if theologians would agree to change the names of those two categories. They're confusing to our ears because they aren't describing things of the same sort. We hear the one, Biblical, and tend to hear "content." The content is Scriptural. We hear the other, systematic, and tend to hear "method." The method was systematic.

Further confusion arises when one of the terms qualifies the other, like "Biblical systematic theology," or "systematic Biblical theology." This confusion is apparent within theological literature. Various authors nuance the categories somewhat differently or with varying degrees of overlap. Nearly all seem to wrestle with the same problem of keeping them distinguished, both definitionally and methodologically.

The approach I'm taking is that of keeping the Bible's express statements (its theology) distinguished from what we begin to do with those statements (systematizing them). The one is content. The other is something we're doing with it.

This approach enables conscientious preachers to trace the stages at which their theology branches out of objective Divine revelation into more subjective logical conclusion. They can literally diagram their system, like sketching the growth of a tree, and differentiate what limbs can be labeled safely "this is what the Bible says," from those that should be labeled only "this is what seems to be true." They can more easily see that the latter stem either from interpretations of the first (I hope to explore this in a further column) or are refined systematizations based upon them. In either case, it ought to be apparent that the merely systematic branches should flex a bit more freely than the trunk during any storm of debate between Bible believers. 



Dr. Mark Minnick is pastor of Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina.