Prolegomena — First Things

Introduction

This treatise provides an introduction to a series of studies on the doctrines of the Bible. Our goal is to provide a thorough and organized exploration of Christian teaching. We want to encourage people to reconsider some common theological assumptions and deepen their understanding of the Jewish roots of Christianity. We also hope that people will develop a closer relationship with God through a better understanding of His commandments, and we want to enrich the faith and practice of believers by establishing a solid, biblical foundation.

First Things First

The first task is to define some key terms and explain some basic philosophical assumptions. For example, the term “prolegomena” means “that which is said beforehand.” It refers to a preliminary discussion or formal introduction to a lengthy discourse. In theological studies, this includes the initial questions and concepts about the nature, scope, and purpose of theology.

Prolegomena address essential issues such as the definition of theology, the sources of theological knowledge, and the methods employed in theological inquiry. By establishing a clear framework, prolegomena provide a crucial foundation for the deeper doctrinal topics that follow.

Theology is the study of God but also the study of divine truth in general. Theology is broadly divided into two separate categories. Natural Theology is the study of general revelation, while Revealed Theology is the study of special revelation.

General revelation considers the evidence for the existence and attributes of God by examining the laws of nature, the history of Israel, and the human conscience.

Special revelation deals with God’s revelation of Himself through theophanies, miracles, providential events, or prophetic revelation. A theophany is a visible manifestation of God (such as the burning bush, the pillar of fire, or the angel of the LORD). A miracle is a tangible demonstration of God’s power that goes beyond the laws of nature (such as the birth of Isaac, the parting of the Red Sea, or the resurrection of the dead). A providential event, on the other hand, is a highly improbable, natural occurrence that implies a supernatural cause (such as Job’s disasters, Gideon’s victory over Midian, or the birth of Samuel). A prophetic revelation refers to a direct, intelligible communication from God (such as a miracle, a vision, audible words, or Scripture).

The ultimate revelation of God was manifested in the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

General Revelation: The Big Questions

For thousands of years, philosophers and religious teachers have pondered life’s big questions and have tried to provide meaningful answers. They have speculated about the nature of reality

and proposed competing ideas about inanimate cosmic forces or supernatural beings without much success.

For millennia, people assumed that the universe was eternal and unchanging, but astronomers soon realized that the universe was constantly changing. Then, about 100 years ago, science proved that the universe had a beginning.

About 13.7 billion years ago, matter, energy, space, and time burst into existence and will expand forever, but nothing inside our universe can explain how it came to be. Something must have caused the Big Bang, but science can't discover what it is. So, how did the universe get here? Science has no answers.

Many astronomers have observed that there is order and harmony throughout the universe. The laws of physics are simple and elegant as if the universe was intentionally designed and finely tuned for a specific purpose. Did someone create the universe? Science has no answers.

Biologists and organic chemists have studied the microscopic world inside living cells. They have discovered intricate, molecular machines carrying out complex chemical processes. They have learned how to read the complex computer code inside the DNA of every cell. But they can't explain how unguided, natural forces operating on random molecules without sophisticated laboratory equipment could have created the first living cell. So, how did life begin? Science has no answers.

Psychologists have studied the amazing abilities of the human mind. Many animals are intelligent, but they are guided purely by instinct. Humans have a unique capacity for rational thought and verbal communication unparalleled in the animal kingdom. Humans have a conscience and make moral judgments based on an inherent sense of right and wrong.

These abilities appear to transcend the mere chemical processes of neurons and synapses. They suggest that there is a spiritual aspect to the human mind. Why do we possess these mental abilities? Science has no answers.

Doctors can cure many diseases and perform life-saving surgeries. Medical science has extended life expectancy through improved sanitation, optimum nutrition, physical training, and sensible lifestyle choices. But despite all our efforts, we can't prevent the inevitable ravages of aging and death.

We grieve over the loss of family and friends, and we wonder what will happen to us when we die. Will we cease to exist or is there an afterlife? Is there a cosmic judge waiting to send us to an eternal reward or punishment? Science has no answers.

Philosophy can only provide partial answers at best. The evidence suggests the existence of an intelligent designer who created the universe and life, but we can't discover or investigate a hypothetical supernatural realm. So, is there any evidence that this Being has contacted us? The answer is yes.

Special Revelation: The Word of the LORD

The Holy Bible is God's revelation of Himself to mankind. Over 14 centuries, 40 authors wrote 66 books in 3 languages documenting God's message to humanity. The Bible has survived numerous attempts to suppress or destroy it.

Faithful scribes have carefully copied and preserved the text over the generations. And dedicated scholars have translated it into thousands of languages.

Unlike all other religious texts, the Bible proves that God exists and that He has spoken through specially selected messengers. The survival of the Jewish people and the text of Scripture is evidence of providential protection. The fulfillment of many detailed prophecies written centuries in advance can't be lightly dismissed as mere coincidence or pious fraud.

There are four basic ways to study the Bible. Biblical theology is the study of a specific author to identify the unique aspects of his message. Systematic theology is the study of a particular topic throughout the whole Bible. Historical theology is the study of the development of Christian doctrine over time. Practical theology is the application of Christian doctrine in the practices of the Church and the individual Christian. This series will cover various doctrines within systematic theology.

Interpretation

Over the centuries, people have followed widely divergent, often irrational, approaches to interpreting Scripture. For example, early rabbis would combine related passages into a "string of pearls" to teach a lesson. They also used a method called "light and heavy" to extrapolate from a simple truth to a greater application. For example, in Luke 11:13, Jesus reasoned that if human parents naturally give good gifts to their children, then God the Father would give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. Sadly, they also developed a system of interpretation called Gematria, which assigned superstitious meanings to letters and numbers that produced utter rubbish.

The early rabbis weren't the only ones who fell into silly nonsense; many early Christians, influenced by Neoplatonism, adopted the Alexandrian school of interpretation, which taught that every passage had a literal, moral, and allegorical meaning. Eventually, scholars rejected these fanciful and arbitrary methods and insisted that Scripture has only one meaning, the literal sense.

During the Great Awakening in 18th century England, John Wesley developed a thorough, methodical approach to theological reflection that incorporated four key sources: Scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. In the 20th century, theologian Albert Outler sought to highlight how Wesley employed these four elements in a balanced and dynamic way to discern theological truth; Outler called this approach the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

Within the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, Scripture has the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice. Wesley viewed the Bible as the inspired Word of God, containing all things necessary for salvation. While reason, experience, and tradition are essential components of theological reflection, they are always subordinate to and informed by Scripture.

Reason offers logical analysis, experience adds the practical application of the Christian faith, and tradition provides a historical context, but all three must align with and be tested against the teachings of Scripture. This ensures that theological conclusions remain rooted in the foundational truths of the Christian faith as revealed in the Bible.

In the twentieth century, biblical and literary scholars developed the widely accepted principles of modern hermeneutics, which is the art and science of determining the original meaning of the author of a message. While hermeneutics applies to any form of communication, verbal or non-verbal, for a theologian, it means the interpretation of Scripture through a rigorous investigation that includes: historical and cultural analysis, literary and genre analysis, lexical and syntactical analysis, and theological analysis.

An investigator or exegete considers every bit of available data and every possible clue across a wide range of disciplines to determine the most likely meaning of the original author.

The Purpose of Theology

The study of theology is not a purely academic exercise. Theology isn't reserved for ivory tower scholars engaged in esoteric, abstract debates. God had a reason for selecting specific men to write His message for mankind.

The purpose of the Bible is: (1) To reveal who God is so we can have a relationship with Him, (2) To set moral standards that lead to success and happiness, (3) To expose our sinfulness and utter inability to save ourselves, (4) To offer us forgiveness through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, (5) To remove our sinful nature through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who regenerates our hearts and produces the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives, (6) To deliver us from the second death in hellfire, and (7) To give us eternal life in the kingdom of God where there will be no more sorrow, no more pain, and no more death for eternity.

What we believe influences our values, plans, and choices, and they, in turn, determine our fate for all eternity.

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