

Who Needs Theology?



Peter Dodd

What is it, and who needs it?



Peanuts by Charles M. Schultz

Theology

The study of God, His nature, attributes, character, abilities, revelation, works, etc. It is also the application of these truths to the full breadth of human experience and thought.

It is a huge topic, Theology. Known in the Middle Ages as “*The Queen of sciences*,” because other branches of science such as Philosophy etc deferred to it, Theology in some form has been around since the beginning of history. The word comes from two Greek words, θεός, (*Theos*) meaning God, and λόγος (*Logos*), meaning “Word,” or “the embodiment of an idea.”^[1]

Everyone has a theology of some sort. In some form, everyone asks the basic questions, Who is God? How do I know Him? What is my place in the Universe? Is what is taught about Him reliable? As C.S. Lewis noted, “If you do not listen to theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones—bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas.”

But what does Theology do?

In simple terms, our theology – our understanding of God and His ways informs all else. How you see Him determines how you relate to Him. James Orr wrote, “He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of redemption, to a view of the purpose of God’s in creation and history, to a view of human destiny found only in Christianity.

[2] ”

Often, we look at things through a particular lens or colour of the stained-glass window that makes up Theology.

Fundamentalist Theology for example sees the Bible as being without error, and infallible, worthy of respect as God's word and message to us. It is read literally, sometimes without reference to the genre or style of writing, ie history or poetry. It focusses on certain ideas and themes, sometimes at the expense of others.

Liberal Theology is a theology that sees the Bible as a great moral guide but assumes the human authors were all writing with specific agendas, and therefore not fully reliable. It further maintains that mankind is slowly getting better in all ways, especially knowledge and science. For this reason, it stresses human thought, reason and experience over a literal acceptance of what the Bible both says and teaches. But Theology also informs and dictates your hermeneutics.

But what is Hermeneutics?

Leaving aside the inevitable question of “Herman who?”

Hermeneutics is the study and art of interpretation. If you hold to a Liberal Theology for example, then you will assume that the Bible was written by ordinary men attempting to make sense of the world around them in terms they could understand. If you believe that God does not speak, then He could not have spoken in Biblical times either, so Scripture cannot be right when it says that God spoke to His people.

If you do not believe that God spoke to His prophets, you cannot believe predictions made ahead of time were literally fulfilled, or that they were made in the historical period they claim to have been written in. Your view of the Inspiration of Scripture is similar to one that maintains a great artist was “inspired” to paint a great picture after seeing a beautiful sunset. Hermeneutics is practical, however. It considers the writings in the context they were written in, the situations, even the history and traditions of their audience and the authors to understand the ideas discussed

It considers a passage in the context of the whole book it is found in. It even considers the situations of modern hearers to ensure there is no confusion in terms and words. Essentially, hermeneutics prevents people interpreting scripture as they choose

But it is the work of theology and hermeneutics together that creates the final product that we live by: Doctrine. Doctrine is the understanding or set of teachings concerning a given topic or subject. Our understanding of worship, for example, will be determined largely by the teachings we have received on the subject and our “Theology of Worship;’ – our understanding of God and the way He acts in the context of worship. If you believe for example that God created us to be equal to Him, then your worship will be about our own destiny, and what we can do for God, or with His help. If, however, you believe in the Grace of God, and your need for His grace, your worship will be filled with heartfelt gratitude thanks and reverence.

This is why Theology matters.

As Jesus said in John 4:25, “The time is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him.”

We need to be both 'doctrinally correct' and emotionally secure- able to fully open our hearts to Him. Personally, I am persuaded that being secure in your doctrine will lead you to emotional security and openness in His presence. Sometimes I suspect we are more interested in coming to Him with our own agendas, forgetting that if we come to God, we must do so on His terms, not ours, for that would put us in charge. (I am reminded that there are two fundamental points to understanding our place in the Universe. *1. There is a God. 2. You are not He.*)

For this reason, Theology does matter. Calvin writing in his "*Institutes*" (Section 6) taught, "*Man needs the Scriptures to reach a true knowledge of his Creator.*"

"Study, to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." Paul wrote to Timothy^[3].

The same holds true for us as well, for as much as we can deduce His reality, or know *about* Him, we cannot know Him truly without studying the things He wants us to know in the Bible – His work of Self-Revelation. A man in the dark may bump into something and work out that it is a table, but without the light, he will never know what style of table it is, what it is made from, what decorations it has on it. He will know only that it is there, and hurts when he bumps into it.

It is the same with Scripture. Romans 1 tells us that Creation itself bears witness to God, but until Scripture shines its' light onto it, all we will know is that it is there, and it likewise hurts when we bump into its reality. (This is the realm of **Philosophical Theology**, or looking at God from outside the Bible, i.e. what His works say about Him.^[4])

It is important however that as we do study scripture, we build up our ideas from the *whole* of scripture. Sometimes God's instructions on a subject may have had a different context in one place to another in scripture, so we need to see how people's understanding of a subject changed or matured through history, with God's continuing self-disclosure. This is known as **Biblical Theology**. Eventually, we are left with a set of scriptures or related ideas that together can build a balanced picture of the whole. This is **Systematic Theology**.

It is our familiarity with God's Word and the ideas or propositions in the Bible that allow us to form an opinion on the veracity of a statement or proposition ourselves. Writing at the end of the 19th century, J.C. Ryle wrote,

"...We have myriads of "Jelly-fish" worshippers - respectable church-going people, who have no distinct views about any point in theology. They cannot discern things that differ any more than colour-blind people can distinguish colours"

Theology then is not something for the “Religious Academia.” It is something that we all use to increase our understanding of God and His ways. It helps knowing why we believe certain things, and how we came to those conclusions. It drives us deeper into our Faith, becoming more intimate with Him.

My question therefore is, are you a “Jelly-fish Worshipper”? Do you have a theological brain, and a spine to go with it? Can you come to a theological conclusion yourself, or are you reliant on others to tell you what to believe?

1. **Joh 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...** [↑](#)
2. **James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954)** [↑](#)
3. **2 Tim 2:15** [↑](#)
4. **For more on this see William Lane Craig's excellent works on the *Kalam Cosmological Argument* and *Reasonable Faith*.** [↑](#)