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The Value of Reading Theology and Church History

By Henry Middleton

The Value of Reading Theology

Theology can be defined as “intellectual or rational (‘reasoned’) discourse about God or things divine.”¹ It is an expression of beliefs regarding God, man, the meaning of life, the origin and fate of the world, and the afterlife.

The Bible demonstrates the importance of theology in many places. In Luke 24:25-27 Jesus goes through scripture and explains to the disciples all that is written about him. In Acts 2:42 the newly formed church devotes itself to the teachings of the apostles. Paul encourages Timothy to be vigilant in his teaching ministry and to closely watch his teaching (1 Tim 4:13-16) and to entrust his teachings to men capable of continuing the ministry (2 Tim 2:2)

Every person has a theology. Every person has views (or at least speculations) on God, the status of mankind, and the afterlife. *That* is theology. A person’s views may or may not be carefully considered, but each person has at least some thoughts on these issues, and those thoughts will affect how people live their lives. For this reason, it is important that such views be well-grounded.

Some people in church may think that they do not need theology; they only need to know and love and follow Jesus, preach the gospel, and live a good life. But who is Jesus, and what does it mean to love and follow him? What is the gospel, and how and why should we preach it? What is a good life, and how can someone live it? Those are theological questions.

Theology is not a topic relevant only to preachers and academics. First, in Luke 10:27 we are commanded to love God, not only with our hearts, but also with our minds. Second, theology has devotional value. We can learn the significance of what Jesus did for us on the cross. We can also draw strength and encouragement as we learn about God’s provision and about how he preserves those who trust in Christ for salvation. Third, theology affects how we live every day. Our understanding of God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and sovereignty will affect how we respond to difficult times. We can also understand the reasons behind God’s moral commands.

God gave and inspired a book (the Bible) to reveal Himself, explain our need for salvation and his provision, and to guide us in this life (2 Tim 3:14-16). Considering its origin and purpose, it is important for every person to study and understand it. The conclusions we reach from such study are theological.

Studying theology also helps to clarify biblical teaching in a systematic fashion. It integrates biblical teachings to show how one truth relates to another so that we can see the Christian worldview as a cohesive whole rather than as a collection of isolated tenets.

Some people in church might adhere to an evangelical ecumenism which minimizes distinctions for sake of unity. Cooperation between denominations and different theological traditions within biblical orthodoxy is good, but if theology is downplayed as unimportant then this can easily lead to a false unity at the expense of truth. Keeping a distinction between truth and error is extremely important.

The apostles took faithfulness to sound doctrine very seriously and warned against false teachers. In Romans 16:17 Paul warns the Roman church to watch for people who teach false doctrine, and in Ephesians 4:14 he explains that the teaching ministry of the church is intended to protect believers from the deceitfulness of false doctrine (see also Jude 3-4). Hebrews 13:9 warns us not to be led away by “strange teachings.” In 2 John 6-11 John warns the church about false teachers and exhorts them to guard themselves because such teachers are not genuine believers.

So how should someone begin? First, he should regularly read the Bible. Second, let us consider some of the fundamental types of theological resources:

- *Biblical theology* resources explore the theological content of sections of the Bible, whether a particular book, or the Old or New Testament, or the writings of a particular author. They also follow how specific themes develop through the entire Bible.
- *Historical theology* resources examine how key doctrines have developed through church history. They also explain key theological themes (such as justification), the theological developments in particular periods of Christian history (such as the Protestant

¹ Reymond RL (1998) *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed., Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, xxv.

Reformation), and the theological emphases of particular movements (such as the Puritans).

- *Systematic theology* resources incorporate everything that can be learned from biblical and historical theology and organize it into a whole that can be expressed in a systematic way and applied to the contemporary world.

For someone who has read little or no theology, I suggest the following systematic theology books:²

- *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem – This book is easy to read and is filled with scripture references. It is a great resource when looking for verses on a specific theological topic.
- *Integrative Theology* by Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest – This book explores each topic from five angles: historical theology, biblical theology, systematic theology, apologetics, and practical theology.
- *Christian Theology* by Millard J. Erickson – This book is the most in depth of these three. It is a good resource for researching various viewpoints.

The books listed above examine Christian theology as a whole. Some other sources examine particular doctrines in more depth. For example, *The Cross and Salvation* by Bruce A. Demarest is an excellent overview of the doctrine of salvation. In each volume of his *Journey* series, Richard Belcher examines a specific doctrine (such as biblical inspiration, salvation, and church polity) in a narrative fashion through the entertaining fictional story of a Baptist pastor. The first volume is *A Journey in Grace*.

The study of theology does not need to be dry or laborious. It can bring more life into a Christian's spiritual journey. It also brings vitality to the church body and strength during the many challenges faced in life. As Robert Reymond writes:

The church must remain committed to the theological task. And it can do so with the full assurance that its labors will not be a waste of time and energy. For no intellectual pursuit will prove to be more rewarding ultimately than the acquisition of a knowledge of God and of his ways and works.³

² These books are excellent resources for researching theology as a whole, but they do not endorse a young earth position. For a response to their views on the age of the earth, see Mortenson T (2009 Dec 16) Systematic Theology Texts and the Age of the Earth: A Response to the Views of Erickson, Grudem, and Lewis and Demarest <<https://answersingenesis.org/age-of-the-earth/systematic-theology-texts-and-the-age-of-the-earth/>> Accessed 2017 Oct 29.

³ Reymond RL (1998) xxxi.

The Value of Reading Church History

For a Christian, history has incredible value. First, much of the Bible records the history of Israel. Second, the gospel is not merely a collection of abstract principles. It is grounded in the life and atoning work of Jesus. Without Jesus' death and resurrection, events of history, there is no plan of salvation.

There is also value in studying the history of the Christian church. It provides believers with a wider perspective. It helps them to look beyond the context of their local church and their place in time and to see themselves in the wider context of Christians around the world and across the past two thousand years. It reveals how other Christians lived and thought, and it recounts the challenges they faced and the insights they can provide.

Studying church history allows Christians to consider the traditions which have influenced their own theology. James White of Alpha and Omega Ministries has often said that he who is not aware of his traditions is the slave of his traditions. Each Christian is influenced by other people: his pastor, family, friends, prominent preachers and writers, etc., and all of them were influenced by others in the same way. When we simply assume what we grew up believing it is easy to assume that what we believe is solidly biblical. But is it truly biblical? Maybe it is. Maybe it is not. When a Christian recognizes the traditions that have influenced him, it is easier to critically assess them on a biblical basis.

Church history shows how Christians in the past dealt with theological errors. Few if any theological errors today are new. Instead they are repackaged forms of past errors. Christians today can benefit from seeing how Christians in past centuries wrestled with and responded to those errors and gain insight on facing them today.

These benefits further enable us to understand the current state of the church. Why do modern churches do what they do? What are their strengths and weaknesses? What should we change in order to face today's challenges while remaining solidly biblical?

Studying church history also has devotional value. Christians today can draw encouragement from seeing how God has sustained the church through trials and how He has raised up leaders to help show the way.

If you have never read church history, I suggest you begin with a general overview. Two great examples are:

- *Sketches from Church History* by S. M. Houghton – This book is light reading. It only goes through the nineteenth century, but what it does cover is well done. If you want to start with something easy, then this is a good choice.
- *Christianity Through the Centuries* by Earle E. Cairns – This book is more in depth, and it goes through the twentieth century. It not only covers the events of

church history but also discusses the political and social settings behind the events.

If you are interested in studying the historical development of Christian theology, then I suggest beginning with *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* by Alister E. McGrath. It is easy to read and is a useful introduction to historical theology. I also recommend the podcast *5 Minutes in Church History* by Stephen Nichols. It covers a wide range of church history topics. ☞

ANOTHER REASON TO BELIEVE A BIBLICAL AGE OF THE EARTH

On average, each of us acquires about 100 slightly harmful mutations each generation.⁴ Some think the mutation rate can be even higher than this. Natural selection can often eliminate the most harmful mutations, but others will accumulate over the generations to lethal levels. And this also applies to all higher organisms. Such a mutation rate would be expected to result in extinction after several thousand generations and is a huge problem for those holding to a long-age viewpoint.

COMING EVENTS

Thursday, November 9, 7:00 pm, Providence Baptist Church, 6339 Glenwood Ave., Raleigh, Room 237

Note the change of room.

As we have just celebrated the 500th year of the Protestant Reformation, we should reflect on the impact the Reformation had on the importance of Scriptures and how Martin Luther viewed the Genesis account of creation. From Denis Kaiser: "Martin Luther approached the issue of origins from the basic premise that the Bible is the only safe and reliable source of information on that topic, being superior to the writings of philosophers, theologians, astronomers, and scientists. His lectures reveal, nevertheless, that he interacted with the writings of a wide range of ancient and medieval Greek, Jewish, and Latin philosophers and theologians."⁵ The life and impact that Luther had still reverberates today and is of upmost importance in how we live. Read about Luther and come prepared to discuss this remarkable man.

⁴ Kondrashov AS (2002) Direct estimation of human nucleotide mutation rates at 20 loci causing Mendelian diseases, *Human Mutation* 21:12-27.

⁵ Kaiser D (2015) Luther's creation theology, *Perspective Digest*, <<http://www.perspectivedigest.org/article/162/archives/20-2/luther-s-creation-theology>>, Accessed 2017 Oct 16